

The Dwarven Nations Trilogy
Volume Two

Dragonlance[®]

Saga

hammer and axe



Dan Parkinson

“I’ll help you learn about dwarves,” Damon said, “and you tell me what magic is.”

Megistal scratched his head. “That’s like trying to describe red to someone who has always been blind.”

“Try,” Damon demanded.

“Well ... take your barbarian friend there,” he said, indicating Quist. “It is possible that he could be not a human at all, but some other sort of creature—perhaps a wolf?”

“No, it isn’t.” Damon shook his head. “He isn’t a wolf. He’s a man.”

Casually, the wizard waved a finger and muttered an incantation. Suddenly, where Quist Redfeather squatted near the fire, it seemed there was something else instead. A large canine form shimmered around him, feral eyes fixed on the wizard.

“Now, you see?” Megistal said. “Now he is a wolf.”

“No, he isn’t,” Damon said.

Megistal pointed at the vision by the fire. “Don’t you see him? Look! That is no man. That is a wolf!”

“I see a man,” Damon maintained. “There is an image of a wolf surrounding him, but he isn’t it.”

“How can you see a man there?” Megistal shouted. “I don’t see a man!”

“You see what you want to see,” Damon insisted stubbornly. “I see what is there.”

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**Dwarven Nations Trilogy
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Dan Parkinson



HAMMER AND AXE
Dwarven Nations • Volume Two
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Dedicated to the Faithful
and the Fans

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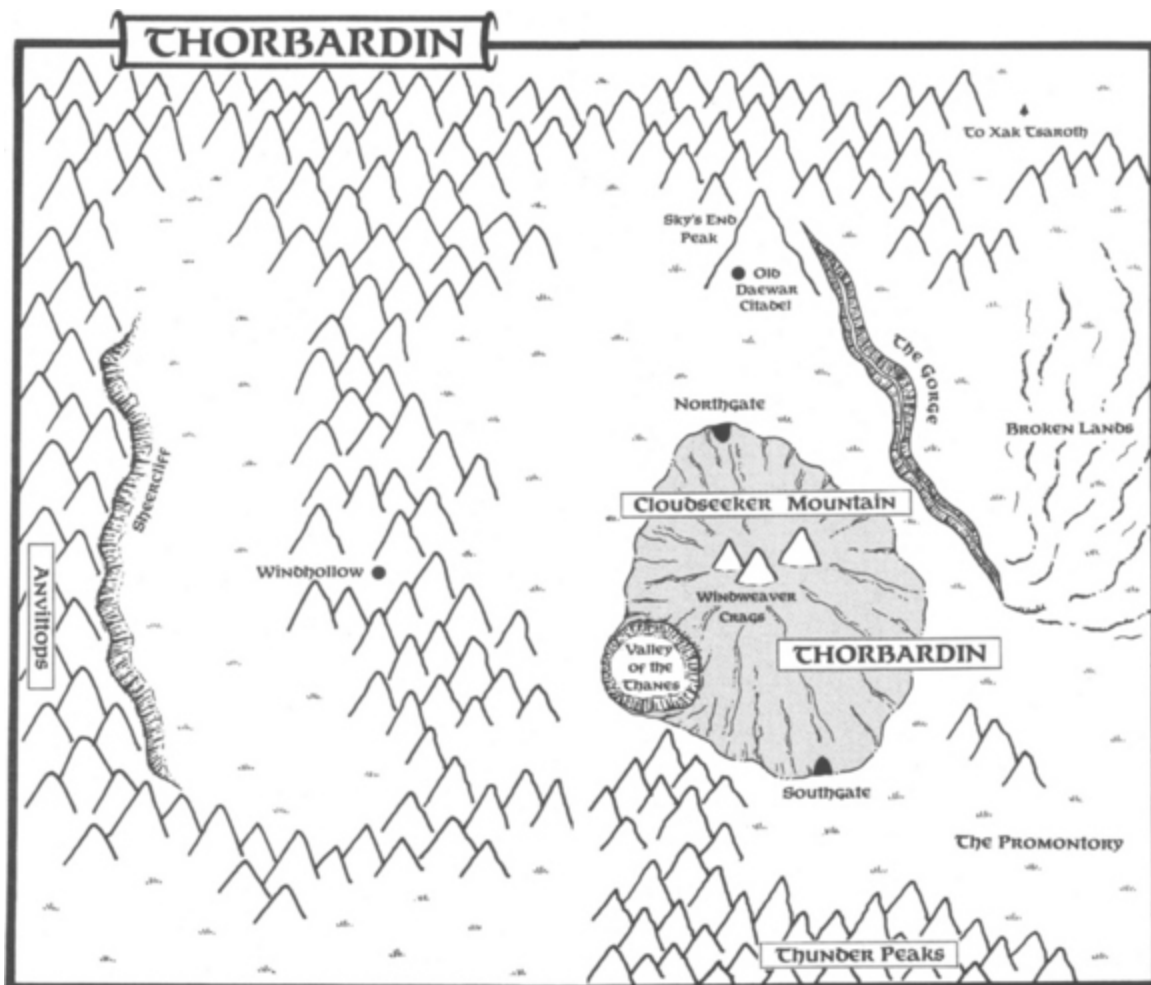
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Prologue

The Dwarven Lands

They went furtively in this land of peaks and valleys, of yawning chasms and soaring heights. From the east they came, traveling sometimes afoot and sometimes, when it was demanded, by arcane means to avoid detection. What they sought was a place that the moons said lay among these mountains: a place where high was low and low was high; where yesterday, today, and tomorrow might form a perfect circle; and where the moons of Krynn, on the seventh midnight of the seventh month of each seventh year, were the corners of a triangle whose exact center was directly overhead.

The place they sought would be suited to the building of a citadel—a Tower of High Sorcery from which to control and direct the magics of a world seeking order within chaos. Seven such places, the movement of the moons said, would be found suitable. The first was known—in the great forests of the ancient dragonlands where now were elves. The other six would be known to those who reached them, by the testing of mirrors and stones.

The three had traveled far to reach this mountain land, intent upon their quest. Few knew of their passing. The skills they had learned from the Scions, the arts of weaving spells to draw and utilize the magics, had served them well. And yet, the search was difficult. The world itself told them where to look, to find the points of perfect balance of forces, but only in general terms. They knew, within a few miles, where the base of the citadel must stand and how it would relate—in many planes, seen and unseen—to other such citadels in other places. High in the western mountains lay a flat plain, bounded by towering peaks and precipitous cliffs—a place where low was high and high was low. But they must find the place,

exactly. Only by testing would they know, and they must suffer the effects of their spells many times to be sure.

A hundred times in a dozen days they had repeated their ritual, here on the high meadow above the Sheercliff escarpment, deep in the land that the dwarves who lived there called Kal-Thax. The moons decreed the area, and their calculations had told them that the root-source of powers from which a Tower of High Sorcery might draw substance was here ... somewhere. But the plain was miles across in all directions.

That they were interlopers in this land, trespassers without leave or warrant, was of little concern to them. They were first-order wizards, trained and nourished in their arts by the Scions themselves. The others suspected that Megistal might be one of those rare ones chosen for deeper magics, though he gave no clue to this, unless it was in the fact that, while the other two had been appointed by their peers to the present mission, Megistal seemed to have appointed himself.

Still, none of them needed permission to go wherever they chose. No one could stop them. No one could even see them if they wished not to be seen. Many times since entering these mountains they had seen dwarves, or heard signal drums, and several times Megistal had suggested that, in all fairness, they should at least let the dwarves know what they were doing. It was none of the dwarves' business, but it might avoid conflicts later if the dwarves were to accept now that there would be a Tower of High Sorcery within their realm, whether they wished it or not.

But each time, the other two had disagreed. "It would just cause a fuss," Sigamon argued. "What they don't know won't hurt them, and, besides, we're doing this for the general good—for their good as much as anyone else's. Magic must be ordered, for the benefit of all. It is the purpose of the citadels."

Of course, Tantas sneered at this attitude. "Dwarves don't matter," he said. "But we'll need them later, and the less they know in advance, the better. When the site is found, we'll need laborers to set the stones. Where better to get slaves than from among these

dwarves? Tell them nothing. When we need them, we shall take them.”

So the dwarves knew nothing of the wizards or why they were there. Recently Megistal had the feeling that *someone* was watching them, but he was certain it was not a dwarf. Whoever it was had not interfered, though Sigamon’s favorite chalice had turned up missing, and Tantas complained that he could not find his blackstone bracelet. So as the days went by the wizards labored, slept, and labored again, drawing upon their own energies to feed the magics of the search.

Megistal was tired now, as he raised bloodstone amulets above his head, one in each hand, and uttered the spell he had repeated a hundred times or more. “*Dactis tat sonan!*” he breathed, and felt the uncomfortable tingling in his shoulders and fingers as the amulets drew strength from him to do his bidding. Little fires arced around and between the two stones, their deep red color becoming an angry glow, like cold, blood-red fire dancing from one to the other. Megistal drew a deep, shuddering breath and commanded, “*Chapak!*” Abruptly the flow of light between the stones extended ahead of him, becoming a double shaft of radiance that grew and raced outward, to converge upon a spot on the ground nearly sixty feet away. Instantly, the ground there seemed to come alive, to swarm with busy, scurrying things, but he knew that was only an illusion.

“Mark the point!” Megistal called, concentrating. It took substantial effort to hold the spell in place.

Tantas and Sigamon hurried forward, Sigamon lifting his muddy white robe above his knees to sprint on long, ungainly legs, while the hunchbacked Tantas scuttled in that peculiar gait of his, clutching his black floppy hat to keep it from falling off. While Megistal stood, intent and motionless, holding the sources of the light in place, the two other wizards knelt where it touched the ground and set a stake there, driving it into the hard earth with a wooden mallet.

Megistal, though exhausted, noticed again the odd, distant rumbling sound that seemed to become more pronounced each time

they ran their tests. It was as though something, somewhere, was reacting to the magic of the search. What it was none of them knew, or really cared. The blood-red light winked out as the wizard lowered his arms. “That’s one corner,” he said. “Who’s next?”

Tantas paced a distance from the stake, scuttling as he always did, and drew his blue-black seek-stones from his pack. As Megistal had done earlier with his bloodstone seekers, the dark wizard lifted his arms, holding the stones high. “*Dactis tat dervum!*” he commanded. Inky mists grew around his hands. “*Chapak!*” From the dark mists, brilliant lightning streaked outward, sizzling and scorching the ground where it touched. Sigamon and Megistal ran to mark the spot, and again the meadow seemed to rumble angrily. Within the past two days, the sound had become quite loud.

The spot chosen by Tantas’s lightning was thirty yards from the point where Megistal’s red light had struck. Sigamon paced the distance, then placed himself directly between the two points. His mark would complete the triangle, but only by testing could they know which direction the triangle should point. Sigamon pulled out his clear, glittering gems and raised them. “*Dactis tat osis!*” he said. “*Chapak!*” Blinding white light flowed from his hands and shot out behind him. Where it struck the ground frost formed. The other two ran to mark the place, and once again the very earth seemed to growl.

“I wish we knew what was causing that,” Sigamon remarked. “The Scions didn’t mention anything like that occurring.”

“I wish I knew where my bracelet went,” Tantas grumbled.

“Magic is a new art.” Megistal shrugged. “There is still much that isn’t known. But once the Towers of Sorcery are in place, the learning can proceed more rapidly.”

* * * * *

In a dark place deep beneath the surface, cold mists stirred and swirled to echoing roars of pure, intense anger. Like a sleeper beset by insects, she had hissed and grumbled, clinging to sleep, shutting out the torments. But they had continued too long—the stings of

unseen aggravation that annoyed her—and now that she was awake, her roar was like the only name she had ever had. Rage.

How long had she slept? She had no way of knowing, but she knew it had been a very long time. Ages of time. Where once there had been an ice cavern, deep within a mountain, now cold mists swirled. And where once she had been trapped within the ice—imprisoned there by forces beyond imagining—now she lay half-encased by a shell of stone, limestone that had formed around her with the gradual melting of the steel-hard ice. Ages had passed. Eons had come and gone while she slept.

But now she was awake, and her name was Rage, and rage was all of her. Her bondage was over. She had been imprisoned because the creatures of her world feared her, with good reason. They were living things, and Rage was death to them. She had rampaged freely among them, exulting in her power to kill. There had never been another like her. It was as though the forces that created her had regretted what they had done and turned against her, imprisoning her forever in the ice. But now, it seemed, forever was over.

Now she was awake again, and free. How, she didn't know, but she was. Were there still creatures in this world? Were they still the soft-bodied, screaming things that had so delighted her, things that held warmth within them and writhed in agony as they died? She didn't know, but she meant to find out. Rage stirred, and the limestone cracked away in the swirling mists that surrounded and clung to her like a silver-dark cloak.

It didn't matter to Rage how she came to be awakened. All that mattered was that she was awake. She slowly studied the stone around her until she found a crack large enough to permit her passage. With the mists flowing about her and following after her, she went looking for the outside world. Eventually she emerged into moonlight near the base of a great wall of serrated stone, a sheer cliff hundreds of feet high. Before her lay a mountain world of peaks and valleys, of stark slopes and vast vistas.

Turning her back to the cliff from which she had emerged, Rage went hunting.

* * * * *

Several hundred miles to the east, where rolling plains began and within view of the eastern range of the mountains of the dwarven realm, high tower windows looked out on the teeming ways and climbing roofs of a great walled city. In the crowded streets below the tower, throngs of people vied for space and for bits of the wealth that was released occasionally by the overlords to sustain the city and its populace. Among them, everywhere, dark-armored and bright-pennanted, marched the companies of grim guards who kept order and enforced the dictates of the overlords.

But the man standing at the tower window was not looking at his city or its thronged streets. Instead he gazed westward, where tall snowcapped peaks, blue with distance, broke the horizon and seemed to dominate it. The nearest and tallest of the peaks, Sky's End, stood like a defiant monolith, seeming to return the man's hard gaze. Between the city and the mountains were nearly impassable barriers—miles of dangerous, broken lands where travelers gathered and brigands hid in waiting, and past that, the great chasm known simply as The Gorge. But the barriers to the mountain lands were more than just terrain. The real obstacle was the border of Kal-Thax, the land of the dwarves. For centuries, conqueror after conqueror had tried and failed to penetrate and seize the mountain lands, but the dwarves of Kal-Thax were fierce and stubborn.

Still, the High Overlord of Xak Tsaroth had ambitions, and one was to conquer and rule the dwarven realm, to loot it of its riches. And the High Overlord had plans in motion, toward that end.

From the west window he turned and crossed the tower chamber, his gilded slippers making almost no sound on the thick, richly textured carpet that covered the polished stone of the floor.

Directly beneath the east window were the postern gates of the keep, where three men were exiting as the High Overlord looked down. Three wizards had come from a distant encampment, seeking audience, and now three were leaving. But they were not exactly the same three. Two were the same—wizards of the orders of Solinari and Lunitari—but the wizard of the Nuitarian order who had come

with them was dead, killed by a magic far greater than his own. In his place a different Nuitarian had joined the remaining two.

The High Overlord did not trust Kistilan. The dark wizard had plans of his own, and the High Overlord knew it. Still, they had an agreement. The mission of the orders—to establish a place of high sorcery in the dwarven lands—was an opportunity too great to let pass. Soon there would be trouble with the dwarves, and Kistilan had agreed to act as the High Overlord's agent. When the time was right, Kistilan would take command of the mages heading westward where their surveyors had gone and would bring down the fortress of the dwarves.

Would Kistilan then give over the realm to the High Overlord? The ruler of Xak Tsaroth did not trust him that far, but then, he had a contingency plan of his own. If any human could penetrate the lands of the dwarves, cross it, and make alliances with western Ergoth beyond, it was Quist Redfeather. And the High Overlord owned Quist Redfeather. As long as the man's family remained captive in the lower chambers of his keep, the High Overlord could command the grim Cobar as he pleased, and the man would do his bidding. Quist Redfeather was already on his way across the dwarven realm. Once before the High Overlord had sent such an emissary, but that one had disappeared. But then, that man had not been Quist Redfeather of the Cobar.

The High Overlord looked down from his window and smiled a cold smile. One way or another, he would see the dwarves of the mountains defeated. One way or another, Xak Tsaroth would have the riches of Kal-Thax.

* * * * *

In the Year of Tin of the Decade of Cherry, toward the end of the Century of Wind as time is reckoned by the dwarven thanes of Kal-Thax, the great undertaking of Thorbardin was nearing completion. Deep beneath the peak called Cloudseeker, with its crown of three crags, the Windweavers, in the subterranean caverns first discovered by the Daewar explorer-spy Urkhan, the mightiest work of the ages stood almost finished. Brought together by necessity and prodded

onward as much by internal conflict as by the dreams of their leaders, the squabbling, bickering subjects of the bonded thanes had, in the opinion of Quill Runebrand, accomplished the improbable.

It was not the building of a huge realm underground—that, after all, was only the logical result of ninety years of concerted effort by the finest planners, delvers, craftsmen, stonemasons, and metalworkers in the world. What Quill held as the height of unlikelihood was that so many dwarves of so many tribes, with so many differences of opinion and so many rock-hard prejudices about one another, could have managed to share the same caverns for so long, without wiping each other out.

Quill Runebrand had never ceased to marvel at the sheer stubbornness behind the great project. Even his old mentor Mistral Thrax, who had been the personal advisor of the visionary Hylar chief Colin Stonetooth, had commented on the strength of purpose that was required, day by day through all the years, to keep thousands and tens of thousands of jovial, arrogant Daewar; suspicious, intuitive Theiwar; sullen, secretive Daergar; and impulsive, unpredictable Klar—not to mention the Hylar, with their tendency to be reserved and aloof; or the Neidar and unaffiliated Einar who wandered about freely; and even the occasional tribes (or *tumbles*, as Quill thought of them) of bumbling little Aghar—working side by side despite their differences.

Colin Stonetooth, chieftain of the Hylar when they had come to this land, had seen a vision and had somehow passed along its power to the other leaders of that first Council of Thanes. The vision was Thorbardin, fortress heart of the dwarven realm of Kal-Thax.

Now the initial plan was nearly complete. Entire cities stood within the great caverns—bright Daebardin with its quartz shafts and crafted sun-tunnels, murky Daerbardin in the shadowed depths of the south sounds, the twin Theiwar communities of Theibardin and Theibolden on the north shore of the Urkhan Sea, the unnamed Klar city sprawling behind the worm warren, and even a jumble of gullies and crude shelters where Aghar lived—now and again—near the Daergar mineral markets. And, mightiest of all, great Hybardin

rising level by level within the giant stalactite the Hylar called the Life Tree.

A hundred varieties of vegetables and edible funguses, and even some exotic grains, were produced in the vast farming warrens. The smelters and forges were never still, and the common markets located along the tunnel roadways thronged with people.

And usually no more than a dozen cases of murder and mayhem were heard each day in the Halls of Justice. To Quill Runebrand, keeper of scrolls and heir to the lore of Mistral Thrax, that was the real wonder of it all. Not in nine tens of years had there been war among the dwarves.

Daewar still plotted and schemed against Hylar, Theiwar still resented and belittled Daewar, Daergar still suspected everyone else of trying to steal their mines, and Klar still ran amok now and then. But still the great project went forward. Thorbardin, the planners said, was within two years of completion. The immense, impenetrable structure of Southgate was in place and in working order, and the portal of Northgate was fitted with its huge screws, awaiting placement of the gate-plug. Sun-tunnels provided sunlight where it was desired, and vast ventilation systems directed the flow of fresh air from the grated ducts in the Valley of the Thaners to the exhaust vents beneath the Windweaver crag. Aqueduct systems designed by Hylar craftsmen carried water to all levels of the cities, and elaborate waste-reusal systems provided fresh organics for the farming warrens.

Even a small magma pit had been completed, deep beneath the lowest levels near Southgate, for the powering of furnaces and smelters. It was, as yet, a balky thing, lacking the natural core of the magma pit the Hylar recalled beneath old Thoradin in the mountains far to the east, but they had succeeded in coaxing it to life, and it worked well enough.

It was no secret, in the human realms surrounding Kal-Thax, that the dwarves were building—or maybe already had built—a fortress to guard their mountain realm, but little was known about it. The dwarves knew it was no secret, but they considered what they did to be their own business and no one else's. Not since the completion of

the Road of Passage, from southern Ergoth across Kal-Thax to the great pass at Tharkas, had there been the massive human assaults on the dwarven lands that had been common in earlier times. The outlanders who traveled the road saw little more of the dwarven environs than the road itself and the formidable armed dwarves who patrolled it. There had been some sporadic assaults in recent years, usually by troops from the human city of Xak Tsaroth, where the overlords coveted the wealth of the dwarves. But these had been turned back, and for the past several years the border had been relatively peaceful.

Only one human had ever seen the inside of Thorbardin, an agent of the overlords who had tried to slip through to western Ergoth to seek an alliance against the dwarves. He had not made it, though. Dwarven patrols had searched him on the Great Road, found his seals and credentials from the High Overlord of Xak Tsaroth, and had arrested him. By order of the Council of Thanes, he was taken to Thorbardin.

That man had seen the fortress—or at least a little of it. He was still there, imprisoned in a dungeon, and would remain there at least until the final gate was in place. There was some thought that, once the fortress was complete, he might be given a tour of one of the gateways, then turned loose. It was Olim Goldbuckle's belief that it might be a good thing for the High Overlord of Xak Tsaroth to know just what awaited him if he ever again thought about conquering the dwarves.

Olim Goldbuckle was senior among the chieftains of the Council of Thanes and served as regent. The old Daewar schemer's beard had gone from sunshine gold to silver in the decades since the Covenant of Thanes, but still he lent to the council that special blend of joviality, energy, and shrewd wisdom that was the very soul of the Daewar people. Of all the thanes, the Daewar had produced more leaders and high officials in Thorbardin than any except the Hylar.

Vog Ironface, once the fiercest of Daergar warriors, was second in seniority on the council. The dark-seeker had become no less fierce over the years, as many an impudent challenger had learned, but in

council he was quiet and contemplative. Often the last to speak, his voice echoing hollowly from behind his metal mask, or—sometimes—almost whispering as he made a major point in debate, Vog Ironface was known for the cold, incisive wisdom of his thoughts as much as for his reclusiveness outside of formal council meetings.

Third in seniority was Slide Tolec. It was said of him that he had never wanted to be chieftain of the Theiwar and had spent ninety years trying to retire, but his own people would not let him. Long-armed, broad-shouldered, and gray of mane when he removed his mesh headgear, Slide Tolec had become a revered member of the high council simply by being intuitively aware—more than any other among them—of the expectations, hopes, and grievances of the people of Thorbardin. When Slide Tolec spoke of the mood of the people, the other chieftains listened.

And then there were the Hylar. Though not the most senior member of the council, Willen Ironmaul was greatly respected, not only in his own right but as successor to the first Hylar leader, Colin Stonetooth. At about a hundred and fifty years of age, Willen Ironmaul was big, strong, and fit, but to his vitality had been added a deep, almost tangible dignity. Of all the chieftains on the council, Willen Ironmaul—the former leader of the Hylar Guard—was the one who best exemplified the honor and discipline that had become the code of all the forces of Thorbardin. In the wisdom he displayed as a leader of Thorbardin was the echo of yet another wisdom, that of Tera Sharn, his adored wife and the daughter of Colin Stonetooth. And though he held no position of authority, the chieftain's son, Damon Omenborn, also was a highly respected dwarf.

Among the high officials of Thorbardin were at least seven top officers who were of Hylar stock. Quill Runebrand had speculated that each culture generated its own special qualities. Daewar excelled in trade, diplomacy, and many of the stone crafts; Theiwar excelled in matters of plain logic brightened by intuition, as well as in the crafting of rails, cables, and roadways; and the Daergar were accepted masters of mining and minerals.

In the same way, Quill supposed, the Hylar tended to produce both warriors and leaders. Oddly, they also produced poets and

musicians, but that seemed to be beside the point. The point was, he assured himself, that of all the necessary functions of Thorbardin, nearly half were directed by Hylar.

As keeper of scrolls, Quill Runebrand wandered Thorbardin, snooping and observing, listening and questioning, and each day he repaired to his cubicle to enscroll his notes and make his observations, chronicling the great adventure of the creation of Krynn's finest fortress.

Lately, he had taken to following Damon Omenborn around. It had started the day Quill went out onto the lower slopes to witness a combat between Damon and his uncle, the Neidar chieftain Cale Greeneye. The challenge was a good-natured one, following an argument over which was mightier in combat, the hammer or the axe. They had not come to any agreement, so, in good dwarven fashion, the only thing to do was to fight it out.

Quill would never forget that day. There on the sunny meadows of the lower slopes, under a spreading tree, the two warriors—uncle and nephew—had donned armor and taken up arms while hundreds of curious dwarves gathered around to watch.

The weapons were simple. Damon had carried a hammer and shield, Cale Greeneye an axe and shield. They had faced each other, saluted, then launched a simultaneous attack, each doing his best to kill the other, just to prove his point.

It was recorded that the two had fought for most of an afternoon, pounding away at each other, lunging, swinging, dodging, and shielding while the sun of Krynn swept from directly above the Windweaver crag to just above the Anviltops in the west. Four times the fight had stopped, while the combatants outfitted themselves with fresh armor and new shields—the discarded items were so dented and bent that they were good only for scrap—then continued with fresh enthusiasm.

The argument never had been settled. The Neidar with his axe was a match for the Hylar with his hammer, and the Hylar was the equal of the Neidar as well. Finally the two contestants had backed away, saluted each other, and gone off together to see what kind of ale might be found in the taverns of Gateway.

Behind them, though, a ritual was being born. Many a wager had been laid by onlookers during the combat. The wagers being unsettled by the outcome of the battle, others had taken up the contest. A Daewar merchant had started it by refusing to pay off a side bet to a Neidar woodsman. Before the echoes of their shouts had died away, the two had armed themselves and were having at it under that same spreading tree. Within minutes, a dozen separate conflicts had broken out around them, and the slopes rang with the clash and clatter of steel on steel. From that day forward, it was the custom to settle disputed wagers not in the pits of the Great Hall, where taunts and challenges were often heard, but out on the slopes under what would be named the Tree of Pittance.

Since then, Quill Runebrand had taken particular interest in Damon Omenborn and had tagged after him with an eye to learning whether the Hylar chieftain's son had plans to remarry. Damon had married once at about fifty years of age to a lovely Hylar girl named Dena Grayslate. But Dena had died childless, drowned in the Urkhan Sea when a cable-boat capsized, and Damon had never really gotten over it.

Still, there was the legend of Damon's birth—that an apparition had appeared and proclaimed that the child would be the “father of kings.” It was a puzzling legend, since there were no kings in Thorbardin, and it was unlikely there ever would be, considering the tribal rivalries of the thanes. Damon Omenborn was ninety years old now—still a robust young dwarf, but certainly no longer a youth. And far from being the father of kings, it was beginning to look as though he might never be a father at all if he didn't put his grief behind him and find a wife.

So Quill Runebrand had taken it upon himself to bedevil the chieftain's burly son about his “responsibilities”—to the point that he began to fear that the big dwarf might break a few of his bones in irritation.

Just now, though, Damon was away from Thorbardin. He had gone off on some errand with his friend Mace Hammerstand, captain of the Roving Guard, and hadn't returned.

Quill had shrugged and resumed his old habits. He roamed, pried and inquired, and made notes. Each evening, at the dimming of the sun-tunnels, he put away his work and made his way to the Den of Respite. Among the things he had learned from old Mistral Thrax was the appreciation of a half-loaf, pot meat, and a mug of good dwarven ale.

The Dwarven Realm of Old Kal-Thax Kharolis Mountains

Century of Wind
Decade of Cherry
Spring, Year of Tin

(The ninetieth year in the construction of Thorbardin, founded by the bonded thanes of Kal-Thax, under the Covenant of the Forge.)



1

The Rage-Seekers

The scene was like the others that the Neidar had reported. What had been a tiny village, deep within a little valley among the Horn's Echo Peaks west of the Windweavers, now was a scene of wreckage and devastation. Damon Omenborn stood on a low ledge, brow-shadowed eyes narrowed and cold as he turned slowly, scanning the surrounding slopes for any sign they might give. Beside him his uncle, the Neidar leader Cale Greeneye, cursed quietly and methodically, shaking his head. Below them, Neidar scouts mingled with Mace Hammerstand's grim warriors from Thorbardin as they poked through the debris, gray-faced and shaken at what they found.

A few of the low, thatch-roofed cabins had burned, though most were simply demolished and ransacked as though by something gone berserk. Tables, chairs, stools, and cots lay broken and splintered. Bits of fabric, once clothing, towels, and even tapestries, now lay sodden or fluttered in the breeze like little shredded flags. Damaged tools lay scattered on the ground, and even humble cooking pots were strewn about, bent and dented.

Some of the houses and outbuildings had doors smashed inward and stood empty and deserted. But other cabins had been literally torn apart, ripped asunder log from lintel, their heavy plank doors and shutters torn from their hinges, their roofs smashed as though by rockslides. Within these, which had been the soundest and strongest of the village structures, lay most of the dead. The people had known that something fearful was upon them and had tried to protect themselves. But their efforts had failed. Whatever had wanted in had gotten in, one way or another.

Everywhere there was spattered blood, drying in the high mountain air, and the bodies of the dead brought a pallor to even the hardiest dwarves. These people had not been merely killed. They had been violated, their bodies ripped and torn apart. They had been mutilated as horribly as the carcasses of their flocks in the surrounding pastures, as the devastated crops left ruined and flattened in their fields.

Cale said it was like the other villages where this had happened—three times now, that the Neidar knew about—except for two things. The other tragedies had occurred in distant border villages far to the northwest in the shadows of the Iron Wall Peaks. This was much deeper into Kal-Thax and much closer to the undermountain fortress of Thorbardin. There had been no survivors the other two times. This time there were. Damon gazed down at the little group huddled around a tiny fire and felt a stab of pity. There were only four of them there, being attended and questioned by Cale's Neidar followers and a handful of Thorbardin warriors, Mace Hammerstand's Roving Guard, with whom Damon had come from the great fortress beneath the Windweavers.

Four survivors. Out of a hundred or more peaceful, harmless Einar dwarves minding their own business in their little settlement, only four had survived! A gray-bearded ancient with blood on his shirt, a young woman with auburn hair whose haunted eyes looked out from a face covered with smudges and grime, and two young, orphaned children were all that remained of the village of Windhollow. They had escaped the fury of—whatever it was—by hiding in a root cellar.

"No one here had a chance," Damon muttered, his cold gray eyes wintry and fierce. Wind-whipped and tight with barely controlled emotions, he tensed hard shoulders and turned his eyes away from the carnage below. Though at five feet, four inches, Damon was taller than most of his kind, and ninety years had brought him to full maturity, still at this moment he seemed—to his uncle—to be very young. Nothing in Damon's life so far, in and around the great subterranean realm of Thorbardin, had prepared him for such savagery as was displayed here. Damon had known grief, of course.

Cale wondered if his nephew had ever really recovered from the loss of his wife to the waters of the Urkhan Sea. But no one was ever prepared for a spectacle like this.

Cale Greeneye shook his head, grim anger narrowing his own eyes as the thin, cold mountain breeze rippled his full snow-touched beard. For three hundred years these Einar had kept to their little valley, tending their herds and their crops, supporting their families, hurting no one. Yet something deadly had come, and now—in one night—everything was destroyed.

But by what?

“No chance at all,” the Neidar leader rumbled, agreeing with his nephew.

They had spoken to the survivors, but learned almost nothing. Whatever it was that came had come unseen. Mists had rolled in that evening, and a heavy fog. The destroyer had been in the cloaking mists. They had heard its roar, and had glimpses of ... of something very evil and very large that seemed to wrap itself in fog and darkness. Then the terror had begun. The old dwarf’s hands shook as he tried to describe the sounds and scents of rampaging death. The children had cringed, wide-eyed and pale, remembering. Of them all, only the young woman, Willow Summercloud, had not wept. She had seemed to feel no emotion at all ... until one met her eyes and saw there a determination so deep and cold that it was like mountain snow.

Cale Greeneye gritted his teeth and looked away. In a hundred and thirty years of life he had fought many things, many times—hordes of human mercenaries, ogres and goblins on the border slopes of Kal-Thax, great cats in the hidden valley southwest of Tharkas. Like most dwarves in these lands, he had seen death and had known grief. He had seen the great pit beneath which lay the remains of his brother, Handil the Drum. He had seen the lifeless body of his own father, Colin Stonetooth, after the old chieftain was felled by treachery so long ago—ninety years or more—in the caverns beneath the Windweavers. And, like Damon, he had known the worst grief. He had lost his own beloved Spring, wife and best friend of nearly seventy years, to an avalanche.

Through the years, many a grief had touched the dwarf known once as Cale Cloudwalker of the Calnar, later Cale Chieftain's-Son of the Hylar, and now as Cale Greeneye of the Neidar.

But never had anything touched him more deeply than the sight of these four desolate dwarves staring at what was left of their homes. The old one sat with dull eyes that saw nothing and shut out everything. The two children seemed to be in a trance, and the young woman—Willow Summercloud—wandered aimlessly here and there, poking through wreckage.

"We must find the thing that did this," Cale told Damon. "The Neidar know these mountains best. We will search."

At the scrape of steel soles on stone, they turned. Mace Hammerstand, captain of the Roving Guard and leader of the Thorbardin expedition, had completed his questioning of the survivors and was climbing up to join the two on the ledge. Like the other two, the young captain was of Hylar stock, with the dark, back-swept beard, chiseled features, and intense, thoughtful eyes of his ancestors. Polished steel armor glinted beneath his short cape of gray velvet, and the hammer and shield at his back were carried as casually as a stonemason would carry a wedge-maul. Like all of the Roving Guard of Thorbardin, Mace Hammerstand—at three inches over five feet in stature, nearly as tall as Damon himself—was a formidable warrior. But the eyes he turned upon Cale and Damon now were full of distress.

"They've told us all they can," the captain said. "Maybe they had a glimpse of the thing in the fog, but they aren't sure. They heard it, though. They heard it"—he gestured futilely, indicating the strewn devastation of the little valley—"doing that."

"Nothing more?" Cale frowned. "There must be something they can tell us."

"It was large." Mace shrugged. "It came in low, beneath the mists on the fields, but when it raised itself upright, it stood above the roofs of the cabins. The fog seemed to follow it, as though it were draped and wrapped in swirling mist. And its roar was like winter wind that rattled the walls. The old one has an impression of great fangs—as long, he says, as he is tall—and of huge, rending claws.

But he saw only a glimpse and isn't sure even of that." Mace sighed. "Now he sees nothing at all. He says he doesn't care to see any more."

"No tracks?" Cale pressed. "Nothing?"

"We have found marks." The Hylar nodded. "Your scouts found them. But they are indistinct. How do you look for the tracks of something that might have anything for feet? Or might not even walk?"

"What does that mean?" Cale glanced at him.

"I don't know. It's something one of the children said. The littlest one. He said the cellar door rattled when the fog beat its wings."

"Wings," Cale mused. "Like a dragon?"

"Who knows?" Mace shook his head. "Have you ever seen a dragon, Cale?"

"No," the Neidar admitted. "I never have."

"Nor have I. Nor has anyone else I know. But I don't believe this was the work of any dragon. Why would a dragon hide itself in mists? And why"—he pointed again, out across the rent fields, the shattered village—"why would a dragon wreak such mindless havoc? They say dragons are mighty, and can be fierce, but I never heard of a dragon as berserk as a bell-taunted tractor worm."

Cale stroked his beard, thinking. What could be as powerful as a dragon, and as big as a dragon, and maybe even fly like a dragon, but was not a dragon? He shook his head and pulled his heavy, mottled cloak around him, seeming to blend into the mist and stone of the surroundings.

Like an elf, Mace thought. These Neidar become the terrain, as elves become their forests. Yet, glancing at Cale's troubled face beneath his studded helmet—the dark hair with only traces of gray, the trimmed, back-swept beard—reminded him that Cale Greeneye, youngest son of the legendary chieftain Colin Stonetooth, was as much Hylar by origin as he himself was. As Hylar as the big Damon Omenborn and his father, the Hylar chieftain Willen Ironmaul—Cale's brother-in-law. Cale Greeneye was of Hylar stock and had been Hylar once, before choosing the sun over the stone—the axe over the hammer. Some said that Cale Greeneye had been the first

of those who now called themselves Neidar—a bonded thane, and as much a part of Thorbardin as those who lived beneath the mountain peaks.

Yet the Neidar preferred life outside to life inside the great caverns of the subterranean fortress. They numbered in the thousands now and were often present within the cavern walls. But they didn't really live there. They came to trade and to visit, and sometimes to sit in council with the other thanes. They served Kal-Thax as scouts and observers, as border guards, and as guardians of the great Road of Passage that ran through the dwarven lands from the southern plains of the human realms to the vast lands north of Tharkas.

Many of the Neidar had been simple Einar in times past—the people of valleys and scattered villages like this one had been. But there were also many Neidar who had been of the undermountain thanes. Among them were gold-bearded Daewar, stocky, long-armed Theiwar, and even a few iron-masked Daergar and wild-haired Klar. Like Cale Greeneye, they were Neidar because they chose to be Neidar, because they preferred the outsides of mountains to the insides.

Just as the Holgar—the combined thanes working to complete the great gates and the intricate ventilation systems, which were the final tasks in the building of Fortress Thorbardin—were considered people of the hammer, so the Neidar were considered people of the axe.

Mace Hammerstand shook himself out of his thoughts and turned to look once more across the devastated little valley. “We’ve done all we can do here,” he said. “But for burying the dead and drumming a dirge over them, there’s nothing more that the guards can do except report back to Thorbardin.”

“It’s out there somewhere,” Cale Greeneye muttered, turning slowly as he scanned the immense vistas of the Kharolis Mountains. “First Meadowfair, then the digs at Ironstone, and now here, at Windhollow. Each time, deeper into Kal-Thax. Whatever did this, it’s out there somewhere. It has to be found and destroyed.” With an angry oath he swung his shield to his back, slung his axe at his side,

pushed back his cloak, and whistled shrilly. Turning toward his nephew, he said, "I'm glad you came, Damon. My regards to your mother and your father. Tell them ... say that if this thing can be found, we will find it and destroy it." Then he headed down from the ledge, into the little valley.

Damon Omenborn did not respond, or watch him go. The big Hylar was gazing westward, a thoughtful look in his eyes.

Cale's Neidar company met him at the foot of the slope—sixty grim-faced dwarves, some leading their horses, some already mounted. Molt Bronzecap led his chief's horse, Piquin, forward and handed him the reins. Many generations of fine horses separated this Piquin from the great Calnar steed Cale had ridden so long ago on the great trek of the Hylar exiles from Thoradin to Kal-Thax. This Piquin was not as tall as the great horse who was his ancestor. But he was big enough, sturdy and strong, with both the mountain-bred stamina of those tall Calnar steeds of the past and the quick, precise reflexes of the Ergothian plains horses who were also his ancestors. With treaties and trade had come cross-breeding of stock, and now both the dwarves of Kal-Thax and the humans of southern Ergoth preferred and prized these fine mounts. The knights of the human realms had come to refer to them as "war horses."

Cale rubbed the horse's muzzle with strong, gentle fingers and turned to face his company. "We don't know what manner of beast murdered these people," he said. "And we don't know where it went. But it is within Kal-Thax now. I call for volunteers to help me find it."

Instantly, the entire Neidar company moved forward, volunteering. Cale shook his head, looking from one to another of them. Most of them were young adventurers, all rode with him by choice, and he knew that each would happily follow him anywhere. Here jovial blue eyes glinted above the golden whiskers of a Daewar face; there serious gray eyes above the swept-back beard of Hylar heritage; and just beyond, the somber features, wide shoulders and long arms of one whose parents were Theiwar; side by side with a fierce, grinning youngster whose unruly mane and sparse beard spoke of Klar background.

One, who had stepped his mount closer than most, seemed to have no face at all—only a featureless iron ovoid with an eye-slit, hiding him from helm to chin. Crag Ironface was older than most of the company, nearer to Cale’s own age. The son of old Vog Ironface, chieftain of the Daergar of Thorbardin, Crag had been among the first of the dark-seeking Daergar to venture from that people’s mines and tunnels and seek the outside world of the Neidar.

“You, Crag,” Cale said. “The thing we seek is a thing of darkness and the mist. Maybe your eyes will see what others of us might miss.” He scanned the line. “You, Gem Coppertoe”—he pointed at a Daewar, then at a wide-shouldered Theiwar youth—“and you, Pounce Tambac. And you, Molt, and you ...” He went on, selecting ten from among them to accompany him in the search. Then he turned to a curly-bearded former Einar and nodded. “Take charge of the rest of the company, Gran. There is still the business of those wizards. Go northeast to where the Road of Passage cuts through the Redrock Peaks. Talk to the guards there, and see what they know. If human magic-users have strayed into these lands, they are trespassing. See if you can find them and prod them on their way.”

“I hope the reports are wrong,” Gran Stonemill said. “I have no use for mages.”

“Nor does anyone else,” Cale assured him. “Just find them and ask them to leave, but take no chances. Be careful.”

“Aye,” Gran rumbled. “The less association with spell-makers, the better. But what if we find them, and they won’t leave?”

“Then get back to Thorbardin and let the Council of Thanes decide what to do about them.” Cale released the little boarding ladder on Piquin’s saddle skirt, clambered up, and resecured the ladder. “We’ll meet back at Northgate,” he told Gran. He raised his arm and swung it downward, spurring Piquin. “Volunteers! With me!”

Mace Hammerstand watched with troubled eyes as the Neidar rode away, Cale and his ten eastward, the rest northward toward the Great Road. Then he signaled his drummers to call assembly. His own company of Thorbardin guards still had work to do here, as

unpleasant as it was. There were dead dwarves to be buried and honored.

Other people were on the scene now, too—groups of Einar from the next valley, coming forward to take charge of the four survivors, to care for them. It was some of these—people from the settlement of Under-bluff—who had found and reported the destruction of Windhollow.

Damon Omenborn had knelt below the ledge and was scratching patterns in the sand with the point of his dagger. “Meadowfair was first,” he muttered, “then Ironstone. And now here. The path is an arc, first northward and then east. It came from the west then. Beyond Meadowfair.” He stood, straightening his light armor. His great Hylar sword swung at his side, seeming almost a toy against his powerful stature—so like the stature of his father, Willen Ironmaul, chieftain of the Hylar. “It came from the wilderness. Sheercliff and the Anviltops lie beyond Meadowfair.

“I want to backtrack to where this thing came from,” he told Mace. “There may be something to be learned there.”

“I have to return with the Guard and report,” Mace Hammerstand reminded him. “The members of the council will be waiting.”

“You don’t need me to report,” Damon said. “And I don’t need the Guard. I’m going to find where this thing originated.” He waved, and a guardsman brought up his horse, one of Willen Ironmaul’s prize herd.

“Don’t go alone,” Mace urged. “At least take a few of my guards with you.”

From the ranks, a strapping youngster with the mesh faceplate and long arms of Theiwar stock stepped forward. “I’ll go, Captain,” he told Mace.

“And I,” a gold-bearded Daewar added.

Mace looked at them, then nodded. “Very well, Tag Salan and Copper Blueboot.” He turned to Damon. “Take these two, at least,” he insisted, “though I don’t like the idea of you heading out there, Damon, even with escort.”

“I go where I please in Kal-Thax,” the big dwarf reminded the captain sternly. Horses were already being brought forward for the

two escorts. Damon clapped his friend on the shoulder. "If you're worried about what my mother will say, Mace, tell her you tried to stop me and I bounced a rock off your skull."

Damon felt someone tugging at his cloak and turned. The Einar girl stood there, looking up at him with large grave eyes. Among the wreckage of the village she had found bits of warm clothing and other things. Now she stood before him, wrapped in furs and woolens and carrying a stained sling-pack. On her feet were sturdy boots, and in one hand she held a forester's axe. Despite the ordeal she had been through, she was dry-eyed and calm, though in her eyes was a burning anger. "I want to go with you," she said. "I want to find that ... that thing's den. I want to see where it came from, and why."

Damon stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. "Your place is here," he said softly. "We will be traveling fast and have no time for anyone who might slow us down."

Her eyes, full of anger and scorn like clouds in a summer sky, blazed at him. They were like her name, Summercloud.

"Fast?" She hissed the word and turned to point where the Neidar had gone. "*They* travel fast, Holgar. The Neidar. I can keep up with a hole-dweller like you anytime. I *demand* to go with you! I want to learn what that thing is, so I can help kill it."

At a loss for words in the face of such scorn and fury, Damon spread his hands, then clenched his jaw and shook his head. "You've been through a bad experience," he said. "I understand your feelings, your loss..."

"Loss!" Willow glared at him. "What would you know of loss, you who live sheltered by mountaintops? My whole family died here, hole-dweller! My father and mother, my sisters, my grandmother. You weren't here. You didn't hear the screams, but I did. Maybe the Neidar will find that thing and kill it, and maybe not. But I'm going with you."

"No, you aren't," he said flatly. "You are staying here." He turned. "Mace, look after this girl. She's upset and distraught, and not thinking clearly. Take care of her."

With his two members of the Roving Guard, Damon Omenborn—Damon the Quiet, only son of the chieftain of Thane Hylar of Thorbardin—mounted and headed west, toward the distant, climbing ranges of Kal-Thax. And as the mountain terrain unfolded ahead, he admitted to himself that he shared something in common with his uncle, Cale Greeneye. Damon was not Neidar; he preferred the bustle of Thorbardin to the open spaces outside. But now and then, he admitted, it was good to breathe the open air of the mountains.

Watching them disappear around a bend on the climbing trail westward, Mace Hammerstand whispered a quick prayer to Reorx to protect them. He knew Damon could take care of himself. There wasn't a tougher fighter in all of Thorbardin. And the others, Tag Salan and Copper Blueboot, though young, were also seasoned fighters. Still, he had a bad feeling about the three taking off like that. It would have been better had they stayed with the main company.

Beside him, the girl stood, still holding her axe in white-knuckled hands and watching where the three had gone. "What does that Hylar know of loss?" Willow Summercloud spat.

"Quite a lot," Mace said gently. "More than most people would guess." He turned away. "I hope there is truth in prophecy," he muttered to himself.

Behind him, Willow said, "What?"

"Nothing." Mace shook his head. "I was just thinking about an old prophecy, that Damon Omenborn will one day be the 'father of kings.' If it's true, it should protect him against his own foolhardiness, because he isn't anyone's father yet."

Mace was busy for a time, directing the preparation of graves. When again he thought of the girl and went to look for her, Willow was nowhere to be found.



2

Into the Wilderness

Among most humans—and even among elves, in certain circumstances—serving as escort to the son of a high chieftain would have been a privilege and an honor. But Damon Omenborn knew that for the two members of the Roving Guard riding west with him, their pleasure at the journey had nothing to do with honor. Among the dwarves, no special prestige was attached to being related to someone important. To the pragmatic, individualistic people of Thorbardin, respect and honor were things earned—each person for himself—and did not follow bloodlines.

The pleasure of Tag Salan and Copper Blueboot in accompanying Damon on his mission lay simply in the fact that they liked him, just as he liked them. Damon had many friends among the Roving Guard and had once been one of them before the death of his wife. He had been out on a mission when the boat accident happened, and had never really forgiven himself for being gone when he could have been with her. But instead of being in Thorbardin he was tracking down a rogue magician who had wandered into dwarven lands and was causing havoc among the Einar.

They had never found the magician. He had disappeared, not to be seen again. But through the years, Damon had nurtured a deep and abiding dislike for magic and the users of magic—a dislike even more intense than the distaste most dwarves felt for wizards.

Still, he rarely displayed much anger. If there was one truly disconcerting thing about Damon Omenborn—aside from the sheer size he had inherited from his father—it was that. He simply never seemed to lose his temper. The Hylar were, of course, a cool-headed people by nature. Everyone knew that. As a rule, Hylar were neither

as jovial and exuberant as Daewar nor as quick to anger as the explosive Daergar. Still, Hylar or not, they were dwarves, and theirs was, by and large, a quick-tempered race—quick to anger, quick to react, and, usually, just as quick to forgive and forget afterward.

But if Damon Omenborn ever felt anger, no one had detected it, and many found that quality ominous. What would it take to make Damon Omenborn angry? And—an alarming question to those who knew him well, who knew his strength and his skill—what would he be like if he ever really got mad?

Even now, heading into the wilderness with the memory of the destroyed village still fresh, it seemed to Tag and Copper that Damon was not angry, just intense and curious.

Damon's map in the sand had told him roughly where the—whatever it was—had begun its foray. He headed straight for the central Anviltops to the west, and, with four days of travel behind them, the three dwarves saw the dark, ruler-straight expanse of Sheercliff in the distance ahead.

The Anviltop range was west of Thorbardin near the center of the old dwarven realm traditionally known as Kal-Thax. Like most places in Kal-Thax, the mountains were named for what they resembled—a long, north-to-south ridge of tall peaks, many of them flat-topped in silhouette, like giant anvils. Along the east slope of the range, near its center, a wide, flat plateau extended outward from the mountains, several miles wide in some places, to the sheer, clefted drop that was Sheercliff. From the east, it was a huge, rough wall of solid stone, many miles in length and rising sometimes hundreds of feet straight up from the slopes below, slopes that dropped away into a series of deep, stony canyons.

Though it lay in central Kal-Thax, the region was one of the wildest and most remote in the dwarven realm. It had been casually noted by Einar herdsmen in the early years of Kal-Thax, but except for observations from a distance—from which had come the names of the Anviltop mountains and of Sheercliff and the broken canyons—the area was largely unexplored. Daergar miners had spoken of Sheercliff as a place where hard ores might be sought sometime in the future, and some of the Daewar spoke of the possibility of

extending trade routes across the middle ranges to foster commerce with the humans of western Ergoth—and maybe with the roaming elves who frequented the forests beyond Skywall. But no one had ever really charted or explored the central lands. Most of the dwarven settlement of the mountains of Kal-Thax lay in the eastern third of the region, where the Einar had found fertile valleys and good graze, where the clans had become thanes, and where the immense fortress of Thorbardin was being created deep within a mountain.

As far as anyone in the Thorbardin realm knew, central Kal-Thax was empty.

By the time the travelers made their fourth night camp, within sight of Sheercliff, they were a long way from any place where anyone lived. Thus it came as a surprise when, from the top of a stone bluff in the darkness before the rising of the moons, Tag Salan spotted a speck of firelight some miles away, back the way they had come, on the far side of the wild valley they had spent most of the day crossing. He called to the others and pointed it out to them, but they had no idea whose fire it might be. They hadn't passed anyone that they knew of. In fact, in the past two days they hadn't seen anyone at all.

Still, out there to the east, across the valley they had just crossed, someone had a fire going.

"Einar traders?" the Theiwar wondered. "I didn't see any paths back there, but we could have crossed a trail of some kind."

"Neidar, maybe," the Daewar suggested. "They range far out. Maybe they come this far. It might even be some of those searching for the beast."

"Not likely," the Hylar said. "The beast was going the other way. It could be Neidar, though, on some other errand. Or it could be a Daergar scouting party looking for new veins to mine."

"Daergar don't camp for the night," the Daewar noted. "Not usually, anyway. They'd rather travel at night than in the daytime. Daylight can hurt their eyes if it's bright."

"Then maybe that isn't a supper fire," Damon suggested. "Maybe it's a breakfast fire. It doesn't matter, though. Whoever they are,

they aren't our concern." He shrugged and turned to look westward. "That's our concern. Somewhere ahead, there, is where the thing came from."

"If your uncle Cale and his Neidar find it, we won't have to worry about what it used to be," the Theiwar stated. "They'll kill it, whatever it is."

"Then let's hope they do, and soon." Damon nodded. "But let's make sure that, whatever the thing is, there aren't any more where it came from."

"Where do we start our search?"

"We'll start at Sheercliff, and look there. We'll split up and just scout around. I don't know what we're looking for. Maybe a nest of some kind, a cave with fresh tracks nearby, a roost ..." He shrugged.

"That's fine with me," Tag Salan agreed. "But I intend to have my weapons ready to hand every step of the way."

The Daewar glanced at the Theiwar and grinned. "I've never seen you in any other condition, shadow-hugger. Without your sword, shield, knives, and bludgeons, I don't think I'd recognize you."

Damon was staring westward, squinting in concentration, his eyes straining as he tried to see in the fading light. Tag Salan noticed his intense gaze and followed it. "Did you see something, Damon?"

"I thought I did. Like a flash of light, far away." The three of them scanned the distance, and Tag pointed. "There! I saw it that time. What was it? Lightning?"

"Lightning where there are no clouds?" Copper rasped. "I don't think so."

"Well, it was more than a spark, but it wasn't firelight."

As the three watched, another distant flash came, a brief flare of bright light, gone in an instant. This time, they saw where it seemed to come from and noted the location by landmarks. The flashes came from Sheercliff. Whether above or below the line of the great fault, they couldn't tell across the miles, but the flashes had all come from the same place, an area in line with a V-shaped cut in the silhouette of the Anviltops beyond.

They saw no more flashes, though they watched until the moons were high. Just those three, and no more. But it gave them a place

to aim for. "We'll begin our search there," Damon said. "Tag, your eyes are best in shadow. You take the slopes below Sheercliff, and I'll climb the wall and look above, on the plateau. Copper, we'll leave the horses with you. Find a high point east of the cliff, and have a look from there. You might see something at a distance that we would miss up close."

They made no fire that night. The speck of firelight to the east, and those odd flashes from Sheercliff to the west, told them that they were not alone in the wilderness. So the three made a cold meal of dried meat and flatbread, put their mounts on good graze beside a tiny stream, and settled in for the night. They would take turns at watch, with a particular eye on both the campfire behind them and the cliff-line ahead. Damon took first watch and awakened Tag Salan when the moons were in the western sky.

Had the Theiwar been third on watch, in the dark hours before morning when the moons had set and only starlight fell on the mountains, he might have seen the shadow that drifted by overhead, dark against the darkness. But Copper Blueboot was on watch then, and his Daewar eyes were better suited to daylight than to darkness. So, though he was alert and watchful, he did not notice the shape above as it passed over the dark camp, heading eastward toward the tiny, glowing embers of the campfire the dwarves had seen earlier.

* * * * *

Willow Summercloud was plagued by dark dreams, as she had been each night since the devastation of her village by the thing that came in the fog. Wrapped in a sheepskin beside the fading embers of her little fire, she tossed and turned, catching what moments of rest she could between the dreadful dreams that kept awakening her and the drifting slumber that would lead only to more such dreams.

This time, though, she awakened not from a dream but to a sound. Even as the sleep faded from her mind, she was out of the sheepskin and crouching, her axe in her hand as she scanned the darkness around her. Something had moved, had made a sound, and was nearby, but for a long moment she saw nothing. Then, dimly

against the starry sky, she saw a silhouette that moved, turning to look at her with one big, glistening eye, then with another.

Gripping her axe in both hands, she backed away, squinting. The thing looked like a huge bird in the darkness, with a suggestion of tucked wings and a beak, and long, spread tail feathers that twitched as it turned its head.

“Who ... who are you?” she quavered. “*What* are you?”

The voice that answered her came not from the great bird, but from a point lower down, near her faintly glowing campfire. “No sense trying to talk to Cawe,” it said cheerfully. “Cawe can’t talk. That’s why he lets me ride along, so I can talk for him if there is anybody to talk to. What’s that you’re holding? An axe? We won’t need it. There’s some wood right here to build up the fire.”

A small shadow crouched beside the coals, bent low, and blew on them, flaring them to life, then put on a few sticks. “That should do it,” the voice said. “Now maybe we can see who we’re talking to.”

As the sticks caught and began to blaze, Willow squinted. Standing by her fire was a small person, far shorter even than herself, and delicately proportioned. The creature was not much more than three feet tall, quick and graceful, with a high musical voice and a great mane of dark hair that flowed like a cascade from a tied band atop its head. Beyond, huge against the night shadows, was the thing Willow had thought was a bird. She gasped as she realized that it *was* a bird, though a hundred times the size of any bird she had ever seen. Its curved beak was larger than she was, and the sweep of feather ridges above its big, orange eyes gave it an extremely angry look.

“Who are you?” Willow demanded, tearing her gaze away from the giant bird to glare at the tiny person by her fire.

“That’s a good question.” The stranger nodded. “Just the sort of question people should ask if they want to get acquainted. And it’s the very same question I had in mind. Who are you?”

“I’m Willow Summercloud,” she rasped. “If it’s any of your business.”

Turning toward the bird, the small creature trilled what might have been words, or might have been music—a series of complex

vocal sounds ranging from low hisses to high dancing trills almost beyond hearing. The bird listened, then responded briefly with a deep piercing chirp that might have come from a mine shaft.

The small person turned again and shrugged. "Cawe likes your name well enough. But what he really wants to know is what you intend to do about those people messing up the mesa over there?"

"Where?" Willow stared at the creature. "What people? What mesa?"

"The one above the cliffs." The small one pointed westward. "There are people up there making ice and setting fires and doing all sorts of things. What do you intend to do about it?"

"I don't intend to do anything about it, as far as I know," Willow admitted. "Why should I?"

"You're a dwarf, aren't you? Don't dwarves frown on humans coming into dwarf territory to perform magic?"

"Magic?" Willow shuddered. "They're making magic?"

"They certainly are. That's why Cawe came down from the peaks. His whole family is upset about it, you know. Magic isn't good for raptors."

"Is that what he ... what your bird is? A raptor? I've never seen one."

"Most people haven't. Except me, I guess. I've seen several of them. Lately I've been living with them. But Cawe isn't my bird. He's his own bird. I just came along for the ride."

"Oh, you did," Willow muttered. "Then how about answering my question."

"What question?"

"The one you didn't answer. Who are you?"

"Oh! I guess I didn't tell you, did I? I'm Shill. Actually, my name is Shillitec Medina Quickfoot, but Shill will do. How do you do?"

"How do I do what?"

"I don't know. It's just something people ask when they make themselves acquainted ... isn't it? Or has all that changed?"

The firelight was brighter now, and Willow's eyes widened as she suddenly realized what kind of creature she was talking to. "You're a kender!" she said.

“Of course I am,” the small one said. “Or at least I used to be, before that dumb Jass Bellbrush said I was for the birds. That was when I went to live with the raptors, and if what’s-his-name wants me to come back, he’ll have to find me first. But I am a kender, always have been, always will be.”

“But I’ve seen kender.” Willow stared. “You don’t look like the kender I’ve seen. You look like ... like a girl!”

“Well, I should hope so!” Shill straightened, smoothing back thick, dark hair. “Because that’s what I am.” She looked around, spotted Willow’s pack, and stepped up to it, squatting to look inside. “Do you have anything to eat in here? I’m hungry.”

“Help yourself ...” Willow started to say, then stopped, remembering what she had heard about kender. “No, don’t help yourself. I’ll get you something.” Quickly she went to the pack, brushing the kender aside. “What do you eat?”

“Probably anything,” Shill said.

Pulling a wrapped rabbit-haunch from the pack, Willow glanced up, directly into the fierce, curious eye of the giant bird, which had stepped nearer and leaned for a look. Startled, Willow scooted back, reaching for her axe. “How about him?” she asked the kender girl. “What ... what does he eat?”

“About twice a month,” Shill said casually. “Don’t worry about Cawe. He gets his own food.”

Willow stared at the huge bird’s head with its great, curved beak and glaring eyes. “I’ll just bet he does,” she said.

Shill was looking eastward, where dim light grew above the peaks. “It will be morning, soon,” she said. “Cawe can take us over to the mesa where those people are, then you can decide what you are going to do about them.”



3

The Intruders

For almost fifty years, the Great Road of Passage had been in use. Starting in the plains south of the human city of Xak Tsaroth, the road led westward toward the foothills of the Kharolis Mountains, then curved northwestward where it entered the dwarven lands. At a stone bridge of dwarven construction—no human of the time could have managed such a task—the road crossed the Great Gorge west of the broken lands, beneath the eastern shoulder of the massive peak called Sky's End. There it turned north, skirting the rock-falls below the ruins of what had once been a Daewar fortress, curved long miles around the base of Sky's End climbing toward a high pass, and from there led directly into the mountain fastness of the old dwarven realm of Kal-Thax. It was a mighty road carved into the very stone of the slopes. It wound northward, avoiding the dwarven settlements in the valleys and the meadows, to emerge finally at the northern border at the huge rift known as Tharkas Pass. Beyond there were realms of humans and others.

The road was the result of the first treaty ever struck between the dwarves of Thorbardin, fortress heart of Kal-Thax, and the humans of the southern plains. Willen Ironmaul, chieftain of the Hylar of Thorbardin, and a knight called Lord Charon had agreed that only by such means—a secured way of passage through the wilds of the dwarven ranges—could both of their realms be free of the hordes of refugees and migrants who were at the time a nuisance to the plains people and a serious threat to the mountain-dwelling dwarves.

The road carefully avoided the city of Xak Tsaroth, and at its plains end was guarded by knights of Eastern Ergoth, protecting

those who traveled it against both the depredations of slavers and brigands raiding out of that great city, and the harassment of tariff collectors and armed bullies employed by the overlords of the city. More and more, as the years went by, the knightly orders of human Ergoth were becoming disenchanted with the sprawling, festering city which once had been their primary base. Some among them readily admitted to disenchantment with Ergoth itself.

Nearing the Gorge though, the Road of Passage crossed into dwarven lands. From there to Tharkas Pass, it was patrolled by troops of dwarves answering to the Thaners of Thorbardin. Here the purpose of the patrols was different. The dwarves were not there to protect the travelers. Those who came this way were mostly humans, but of many tribes and with many purposes. There were others, too, sometimes—ogres, though infrequently, and now and then a few kender or a band of wandering elves. On one occasion an entire colony of gnomes had spent nearly a month in the Falconhead Tunnel, before determined dwarves evicted them. The gnomes, it seemed, had somehow gotten stuck in the tunnel, then disagreed among themselves about how to get out and had appointed committees to resolve the issue—a process that, among gnomes, could take years. So a dwarven patrol had expedited their removal.

For the dwarves, the main reason for patrolling the road was to make sure that those who traveled the road stayed on the road and did not stray into dwarven habitat. In Kal-Thax, long ago, the dwarves had forbidden humans or anyone else to settle in and take root. Kal-Thax was for dwarves, and only for dwarves, and the dwarves liked it that way.

Further, in the past few centuries, the dwarves had learned that where humans were, magic would come to be also. Even more than among the elves, there were humans who were fascinated by magic, who grasped it and used it, who practiced it as a dwarf might practice stonemasonry or carpentry.

The dwarves who patrolled the Road of Passage had an excellent record of keeping travelers contained and moving. In fifty years, no more than a handful of humans and one or two ogres had managed to escape from the road and avoid patrols. The exception to the

record was kender. The wandering little people were, simply, uncontainable. A kender went where whim directed, and no patrol captain had ever found a way to keep kender on the road if they decided to take off in some other direction. The dwarves had long since stopped trying to keep kender out of Kal-Thax. It wasn't worth the effort, and aside from being casual thieves and general nuisances, kender were not a threat.

More than any other race, the dwarves agreed, human settlements and humans on the loose must not be tolerated in the realm governed by the thanes of Thorbardin.

When Gran Stonemill and the Neidar company arrived at the Great Road, there was no one on it, and he felt a sense of relief. Gran Stonemill was of Einar descent and had lost ancestors to the wandering hordes of outsiders who had come into these lands in the old days, before the Pact of Exclusion. The road, he knew, was a good idea, but just the sight of outsiders—particularly humans—journeying across Kal-Thax, so close to the scattered fields and villages of the mountain people, was still unsettling to him.

But the road was deserted now. Three hundred feet wide and bordered by high walls of fine dwarven crafting, it wound away southward toward the Great Gorge and northward toward Tharkas Pass, and no one was in sight on the few miles visible from the western crest. At Redrock, though, they found the company of Neidar guards assigned there, and Gran got their report.

Mages, the guard officer told him. Three human mages had entered the road somewhere in Ergoth and had followed it at least beyond the Gorge, where dwarven guards held the bridge. The three had crossed the bridge and had not returned. Drum signals had gone out, alerting those farther on to keep an eye on the humans. But they had not reached Redrock, and a scouting party had gone all the way back to the bridge and found no trace of them. Somewhere along that stretch, the three had left the road. Now, presumably, they were roaming around Kal-Thax, doing whatever humans afflicted with the abomination of magic did.

A search had been conducted, expanding out twelve miles either side of the road, and no trace of them had been found.

Gran shivered at the news. Like any dwarf, his distaste for magic and those who practiced it was intense. Magic was not reasonable. It followed no natural pattern and no natural rules. It was, purely and simply, an abomination.

Like most dwarves, Gran Stonemill had never actually seen a wizard, so far as he knew, and had only the sketchiest idea of what magic-users were capable of doing with their craft. But the stories he had heard told him not to underestimate the power of magic, and his own experience told him to expect the worst of any human. Climbing the sentinel tower, he turned slowly, scanning the mountain terrain, trying to guess what purpose human magicians might have in coming to the dwarvenlands. Certainly the three had a reason for journeying to Kal-Thax, and obviously they didn't want the dwarves to know why they were there.

But what was the reason, and where had the wizards gone? The mountain land was vast; they could be anywhere.

North? Probably not. Had the three been heading north, they could simply have stayed on the road, where travel was permitted by treaty—even for wizards—and was far easier for humans than cross-country travel in these mountains. Probably not east, either. There lay the Kharolis foothills and, beyond, the plains of human Ergoth. And due east from the Redrock Peaks was the human city of Xak Tsaroth. If the wizards had been heading for Xak Tsaroth from the lower plains, they wouldn't have come into the mountains in the first place. And having gone to the trouble to come from Ergoth to here, it wasn't reasonable that they would leave the road and go into hiding, just to go back where they came from.

Gran gazed westward, troubled and puzzled, to where the Kharolis Mountains climbed away into blue distance, range after range of rugged peaks. What was there for wizards? In the valleys and on the slopes there were the fields and settlements of the Neidar, and beyond them the widely scattered Einar. For a hundred miles or so, there were dwarven habitations scattered here and there throughout the mountains. And beyond that was the wilderness. The Bigtooth range lay there, and beyond it the Anviltops, and beyond

them ... who knew what lay beyond? There was nothing but more mountains.

Gran turned slowly, his gaze swinging southward. Beyond the Redrock Peaks, hazy with distance, stood the mighty eminence of Sky's End, thrusting a thousand feet above any other prominence. And beyond Sky's End was Thorbardin. The Neidar's eyes narrowed. What would humans seek in dwarven lands? What did humans always seem to seek? Conquest. And where would one go if one intended to conquer the dwarven lands? Thorbardin. There, deep beneath the surface of Cloudseeker Mountain, was the stronghold of the dwarves.

Had the wizards aimed for Thorbardin? But why? Even if they knew of the place, they would never be allowed inside. Southgate, on the far side facing the Thunder Peaks and the Daergar mines there, was complete now, with a massive, steel-sheathed gate that could be closed at a moment's notice—a gate that was impregnable. Not even magic could penetrate Southgate. Not even dragons, or the mightiest armies, could ever breach it.

Northgate, facing Sky's End and the broken lands bordering Ergoth, did not yet have its gate in place, but it, too, was heavily guarded. At the first sign of trouble, thousands of armed dwarves would mount a defense in the great shaft of Anvil's Echo. Not even magicians would be able to negotiate the suspended bridge from one end to the other of that great chamber, with sling-stones, javelins, and bolts coming at them from the murder holes which lined the way.

Then a memory struck Gran Stonemill, and his jaws clenched. There was another way in! Though it had been sealed for nine decades, the old Daewar tunnel beneath Sky's End was still there, unused and practically forgotten. Delved by the gold-molders a hundred years ago, straight through Sky's End into the subterranean caverns beneath Cloudseeker, the tunnel had been the means by which the caverns which now were Thorbardin had first been occupied.

It was sealed. But could the seals stand against magic spells?

Gran practically flew down the sentinel ladder and signaled to his Neidar. When they were assembled, he divided them into five squads of ten each. Four would take up the search for the wizards where the road guards had stopped. Twelve miles west of the Road of Passage, they would form a cordon and sweep westward, searching. The fifth squadron he would take himself, directly south to Thorbardin, to see the Council of Thanes. It was time to speak of magic and to take another look at the old, original entrance to the undermountain fortress.

* * * * *

Megistal stood alone atop the escarpment of Sheercliff as another sunrise announced itself above the mountain peaks. Standing at the very edge of a precipitous, hundred-foot drop, the wizard sighed and shook his head in annoyance, ignoring the bickering of his two companions some distance behind him. He was not standing there, gazing eastward, for the sake of the view. He was standing there because it was the surest place to keep his back turned to the other two wizards who were scurrying about and throwing angry words at each other.

Just at the moment, Megistal wanted nothing at all to do with either of them. He was exasperated with them both, and so angry that he wasn't sure what he would do if they crossed his vision right now. He was afraid he might lose his self-control and hit them both with a spell so terrible that he would regret it. But he knew he would not. The deep, secret magics granted to him and only a few others by the Scions were not for selfish use, even in exasperation. Still, he growled at the very thought of Tantas and Sigamon.

Not only had they wasted an entire, exhausting day of surveying this blasted mesa, they had virtually wiped out the work that had been done before. Megistal didn't know which of them he blamed more, the lanky, self-righteous Sigamon or the scuttling, sneering Tantas.

Tantas had started it, of course. In a simple survey spell with his dark stones, he had added something extra. He just couldn't resist showing off his destructive powers, it seemed, and the spell had

gotten entirely out of hand. Instead of simply marking a survey point with his lightning, the dark wizard had started a grass fire which swept across great segments of the flat mesa top, propelled by mountain winds.

And then Sigamon, instead of simply dousing the fire with a rain spell, had decided to show off his own powers, and the resulting, sudden ice storm had blinded them all for long minutes while the fires continued to burn unchecked. Scorched and shivering, Megistal had finally managed to put an end to the runaway results of the magics by cloaking the entire mesa in a dense downpour of rain.

But the damage was done. At least half of the survey stakes they had worked so long to set, stakes that marked the closing area of the precise point they had finally found, were either burned away or blown up by quick-frost. The Stone of Threes was in place, but all of the lines of power would have to be restaked if there was ever to be a Tower of High Sorcery in this part of Ansalon.

"I can't believe it," Megistal muttered to himself as the other two wandered around trying to relocate some of the test points so laboriously established. The wizard was beginning to wonder if the tower was worth the aggravation.

All that had occurred two days ago, and Megistal still couldn't bring himself to speak a civil word to the other wizards. But now another day was dawning, and they had dawdled enough. They had work to do, and it wouldn't get done by itself.

He started to turn away from the cliff's edge, then paused as movement caught his eye. High above, first sunlight glinted on something moving. He raised his eyes, then sighed. It was only a bird, a hawk of some kind, soaring high above. He had the impression that it was a large bird, but it was hard to tell. He watched it for a moment, then lowered his gaze and tensed. Other movement was visible now, far off but clear. On the slopes beyond the canyons that footed Sheercliff, three specks moved, coming toward him. He squinted, shading his eyes, then spread his arms, raised them, and lowered them, describing an arc. He stepped back from the cliff's edge, muttered an incantation, and the arc he had made became visible, a ring of shimmering gray like a circle of fog.

Again Megistal muttered, and within the ring shapes became clear: three armed, mounted dwarves, magnified as though seen through a lens. They appeared to be only a hundred feet away, instead of the span of miles where they appeared as only specks.

Sigamon and Tantas had ceased their bickering and came to join him. "Ah, we have company," Tantas rasped. "Dwarves, I believe."

"Most likely you attracted them with your cursed fire," Sigamon said haughtily.

"Or you with your swirling ice," Tantas growled. "Well, we have no time for dwarves right now." He raised his right arm and started to chant a spell, but Megistal stopped him, grabbing his wrist.

"What are you doing?" the red wizard hissed.

"I'm going to kill them." Tantas shook free. "Get out of my way."

"Kill them?" Sigamon stared at the hunched wizard with the black hat. "Why kill them? They are of no consequence."

"But they're coming this way," Tantas pointed out. "If they find us, they might signal for others to come. That could delay us no end."

"There is that." Sigamon shrugged. "Well, be merciful about it then. I do not share your penchant for causing pain ... unless, of course, it is for a worthy cause."

"Stop it, both of you!" Megistal snapped. "There is no reason to kill those dwarves. I shall simply give them an illusion to lead them away."

Without waiting for argument, the red wizard raised a hand, pointed, and muttered, "*Oviat devis duon! Chapak!*" In the viewing ring, the three dwarves blinked, drew rein, and turned their heads this way and that in obvious confusion. One of them lifted a mesh faceplate, squinted, and rubbed a hand across his eyes, then pointed off to the right, his beard twitching as he spoke to the others. The gold-bearded one beside him shrugged and nodded, but the third one—the largest one—shook his head. He gestured, indicating his horse and theirs, and lifted his reins, saying something. Then he pointed straight ahead.

"Blast!" Megistal said. "He knows it is an illusion. But how? I used first-order magic."

“Illusion!” Tantas scoffed. “Soft magic!”

“Interesting,” Sigamon murmured, stepping closer to the viewing ring. “Look at him, how he squints. It is as though he sees your illusion, but also sees through it. See, he is showing the others. Maybe you should rethink your spells, Megistal. This one lacks potency.”

The big dwarf flicked his reins and rode straight ahead, and the others followed him. After a few yards they all blinked, stared, and pointed.

“They’ve broken free of the spell,” Sigamon said. “They have no trouble seeing clearly.”

Megistal scratched his beard thoughtfully. “Have either of you ever used magic against dwarves before?”

“Only to shield ourselves in passage,” Sigamon admitted. “Why?”

“Dwarves hate magic, I understand,” Megistal said. “I’m just wondering if ...”

Tantas ignored the other two. Again he raised his arm, brought it down, and hissed, “*Dagat mordem! Chapak!*”

Abruptly the viewing ring blazed with intense light, and out on the far slopes a ball of blue-white fire grew, engulfing the distant riders. It was gone as quickly as it came, but the scene in the ring was startlingly different. Where before there had been three riders coming down a lush slope, surrounded by low vegetation, now there was smoke, blowing ash, and the blackened forms of three fallen dwarves. The only things moving were three terrified horses, galloping away toward the east, and the lingering smoke that drifted on the wind.

“That settles that,” Tantas chuckled. “They are dead. There is nothing wrong with *my* spells.”

Megistal stared at the hunched wizard in disgust, then turned away. The viewing ring winked out.

“So you killed three dwarves,” Sigamon sneered. “Your spell was still faulty, though. Those horses didn’t seem injured at all. Only frightened.”

“Dumb animals,” Tantas rasped. “Magic sometimes doesn’t touch animals, remember? The Scions told us that.” He swung away, then

turned back to snap, “I could have killed the horses, too, if I had wanted to try another spell. I could have dropped boulders on the brutes. Magic may not be real to them, but boulders are.”

“I don’t understand the big to-do,” carped Sigamon, “over three simple dwarves.”



4

Northgate

The Northgate entrance to Thorbardin, when completed, would be the mirror image of Southgate—a perfectly delved, iron-framed opening in a wall of solid granite that faced onto a wide walled ledge high on the mountainside of Cloudseeker Peak. The sheer granite wall itself was reinforced with an unseen mesh of iron bars drilled into the stone so that it could not be cracked or shattered by even the greatest force. The frame of the opening was polished iron, fourteen feet wide and two feet thick.

Running through the gatehouse behind the opening was a huge screw set in a threaded stone shaft lined with graphite and geared to a waterwheel drive. The screw itself, and its twin—nearly thirty miles away at Southgate —were the two largest single artifacts of solid steel ever produced in dwarven foundries ... or in any foundries. Each contained a year's production of iron, coke, and nickel from the Daergar's best mines, and each had taken nine years to forge, mill, and polish into final shape. Just within the opening on the mountainside was a large, delved area that served as outer gatehouse. The great gate resting there now, ready to be mounted on the screw, was identical to the one in use at Southgate—a massive plug of metal-clad stone, grooved to ride on ranked steel rails set in floor, ceiling, and walls of the gateway. Once mounted, it would be closed by turning the screw to drive it into the opening.

When first planned, Thorbardin's gates had been envisioned as hinged plugs, an effective closure developed by Daewar delvers in times long past. But as the great fortress grew, and the skills of Daewar, Theiwar, and Daergar blended with the crafts of the Hylar, many plans had been modified and improved. A hinged plug could

be circumvented by intruders, given the time and the tools to work on it. A screw-driven plug, internally operated and driven flush into a sleeved opening, could not.

It had been the intention of the original architects of Thorbardin—many of whom still directed the thousands of tasks that went into the project—that the fortress be impregnable to outside attack. Within Thorbardin were the finest craftsmen, the greatest delvers and builders, and the best fortress-planners in the world, and being dwarves they were not adverse to hard work. With its gates in place and working, backed by the great defense passages called Anvil's Echo—huge tunnels two hundred feet high, lined with murder holes and passable only by a narrow bridge suspended halfway up—Thorbardin would be difficult if not impossible to enter for anyone the dwarves decided to keep out.

Every dwarf above the age of first crafting was as skilled in the use of weapons as in the use of tools. It had become a staple of dwarven lore in Thorbardin—originated from old stories told by the Hylar—that the only basic difference between a tool and a weapon was in the using of it. A climbing javelin thrown at an enemy was a spear. A delving hammer swung at the skull of an enemy was a war hammer. A crafter's axe cleaving an enemy shield was a battle-axe. A delver's metal hat worn in combat was a helm, and a fending shield in battle was a fighting shield.

True, there were some weapons that had little use as tools. A bow was not as efficient as a sling for delivering small goods from level to level, a lance made a poor javelin, and swords were forged primarily as trade goods, to be bartered to the humans of the Ergothian orders for things more useful. Of all the dwarves of Thorbardin, only among the Hylar, with their background of human dealings, were there many who would choose a sword over a good hammer as personal armament. And even among the Hylar, the hammer was highly prized as both a tool and a weapon.

It was one of the differences that had developed over the years between the dwarves of Thorbardin and their outside cousins, the Neidar and the scattered Einar. The undermountain dwarves were

known for their love of the hammer, while those outside usually favored the axe.

But whatever tool was at hand, weapons would always be ready to be turned instantly on any outsider trying to invade the fortress of Thorbardin.

As Quill Runebrand, keeper of scrolls, was fond of saying, “There isn’t a conceivable subject that all the people of Thorbardin would ever agree about, except one. Intruders are not welcome here. We might squabble over what day it is, or come to blows over whether there are really two moons or three, but we all agree on the defense of Thorbardin.”

Today, the keeper of scrolls was tagging after Willen Ironmaul as the chieftain of the Hylar, accompanied by his ten personal guards and several Thorbardin officials, toured the facilities of Northgate.

From the growing city of Hybardin, delved into a giant stalactite in the center of the underground realm, the group had gone by cable-boat across the northern Urkhan Sea to the piers of Theibardin, where Willen Ironmaul stopped off to visit briefly with the Theiwar chieftain, Slide Tolec. Then they had followed the Second Road to the newly expanded cavern that would one day be Thorbardin’s second Hall of Justice—the South Hall was becoming so busy these days, with the expansion of a boisterous and quarrelsome population, that a North Hall would be needed soon—and from there northward to Northgate, stopping for a quick look at the great, sheer-sided pit that the delvemaster ironically called the “Shame of Reorx.” It was to have been a magma pit, like the Shaft of Reorx now being completed near Southgate, but here it had not worked.

“One of our failures,” Shaft Redstone said sadly as the group assembled at the edge of the great hole that fell away into darkness below. “Six hundred feet straight down, through solid rock, and there is nothing down there except more solid rock. No steam vents, no fissures, not even a rising of temperatures. A miscalculation, pure and simple. Beneath Southgate there is ignitable magma, so we assumed there would be some here as well. We were wrong.”

“Too bad,” Willen Ironmaul sympathized. “It’s a nice hole, though.”

“Two years of work.” The delvemaster nodded, then shrugged. “Oh, well, we’ll find a use for it. If it won’t feed smelters, maybe we can use it to store grain or something.”

The area around the pit was well lighted, better so than most of the road, because of a large shaft leading to the surface of the mountain slope. It had been intended to fit the shaft with lenses, like the one near Southgate, so that sunlight could be funneled in to ignite the quiescent magma when it was found. Now, though, dwarven workmen thronged above, installing a sun-tunnel in the shaft. If there was no magma to power, at least the hole could provide daylight.

It was the way much of Thorbardin was lighted. Before the sun-tunnels, the great caverns had been dim places, lit only by natural strata of clear and smoky quartz that ran up through the mountain’s heart. The sun-tunnels, created by the craft of Hylar glaziers—and with great banks of mirrors from their shops—were now located in most parts of Thorbardin, providing good light where it was wanted. Only at night—except in those parts of Thorbardin that belonged to the dark-seeking Daergar—were lamps needed to light the fortress.

From Shaft Redstone’s pit it was only a few hundred yards along a wide, high passage to the sprawling, bustling subterranean village of Gatekeep, a three-level series of delvings hollowed out mostly by Daewar delvers and shored and partitioned by Hylar stonemasons. Shops, craft stalls, and vendor tables lined the main road here, and beyond them were the cubicle-homes of several thousand dwarves—guards and their families, tunnel traders, craftsmen, and others. In recent years, the two portal communities, Gateway to the south and Gatekeep to the north, had grown to be cities in their own right, rivaling in size the original seven cities of Thorbardin, clustered around the subterranean Sea of Urkhan. It was temporary growth, though. Now that Southgate was completed, Gateway was beginning to shrink again. Gatekeep would do the same when Northgate was done, as the builders and their families began to move back to the cities. The Council of Thanes already had plans for the delvings

which would be abandoned near the gates. They would be converted into storage for the grains, timber, fibers, smoked meat, furs, and finery accumulated by trade with those in the outside realms and with the humans of Ergoth.

Beyond Gatekeep, three tunnels led to Anvil's Echo and the great gate. Tunnels from the upper and lower levels led to the corridors of defense above and around Anvil's Echo. The central tunnel led into the great bridge chamber itself, emerging on the long, suspended bridge that crossed it from one end to the other.

The place was safe now, and quiet as the procession walked along the bridge, but the members of the little group were aware of the eyes watching them from hundreds of holes, and Willen Ironmaul felt a chill as he thought what this passage would be like for anyone trying to invade Thorbardin.

The gatehouse and surrounding delves bustled with activity. Crafters were doing final fittings on the intricate gear mechanisms that would drive the gate-screw, and metalsmiths were fitting pins and sockets for the final installation of the gate itself.

The group of dwarves chatted with some of the people working there, then crouched to work their way through the narrow housings alongside the great screw, to the gate itself, beyond which lay the outside world.

Little light came through the gate. It was complete, but not open. Temporary stone pillars had been set across its outer rim, leaving only a small door. When the gate was in place, the pillars would be used as supports for sentinel towers on the walled ledge beyond.

The plug itself stood against a wall, just beyond the screw, and the dwarves spread out to wander around it, peeking and peering. Thirty feet high, sixty feet wide, and almost eight feet thick, the thing was cut and shaped from solid stone, drill-reinforced, and was entirely sheathed in metal. The inside face of it was of bronze, the serrated rims and the ring-socket for the great drive screw were filed iron, and the outside face was of thick, polished steel.

It was exactly like the plug at Southgate.

Very soon, it would be in place and usable. Then, Thorbardin would be impregnable. Willen Ironmaul strode along the length of

the huge device, followed closely by the Ten, his personal escort. He paused now and then to measure a seam or taste the metal, nodding. "Perfect," he muttered. "And the drive reservoirs?"

"Filled," Talc Bendiron said. The tapwarden pointed upward, indicating the sheathed stone pipes that descended like great columns from the ceiling to the cut stone housing of the waterwheel. Above, two hundred feet away, was a separate, enclosed cavern filled with water from the sinkhole lake atop Cloudseeker. Valves were in place to release the water when required, and when the water flowed the great screw would turn, riding forward in its rings with tremendous, implacable force. Once begun, nothing short of the plug sealing itself into its socket would stop it.

Beyond the temporary gate, distant trumpets sounded, and a few moments later an armored dwarf hurried down a ladder nearby, saluted the visiting dignitaries, and turned to his watch captain. "Outside parties coming in," he said. "The sentinels say the nearest group is Mace Hammerstand and his guards, returning from the west. A second party is just rounding Sky's End, still too far away to identify, though the sentinel believes they are Neidar."

Quill Runebrand turned to Willen Ironmaul. "It was Mace Hammerstand that your son Damon went out with, Sire?"

"It was." The Hylar chieftain nodded. "And I'll be ... his mother will be glad when he is back. She tends to worry."

"I'll be glad to hear Mace's report," Cable Graypath noted.

Beyond the screw housing, there was a clatter and the sound of angry voices. A high, quavering cry rose above them. "Stand back!" that voice demanded. "Rust and corrosion! If you people would watch where you're going, there'd be fewer accidents around here!"

"You old menace!" another voice roared. "Look what you've done to my load! By Reorx's red rust, it'll take me an hour to pick up all these pins!"

"Menace?" the first voice shouted, then sank to an angry growl. "Menace, he calls me. *Menace!* Fool who can't even stand aside for buckets coming through, and he calls *me* a menace! Moondust!" The

voices died to grumblings and a guard—one of the Ten—scurried past the screw housing, then returned, grinning through his beard.

“What happened?” Willen asked.

“Nothing much,” the guard said. “It’s just some oldster. He and a pinsetter had a collision back there.”

Behind him, the quavery voice rose again. “You, metal-hide! Stand aside! You’re blocking the way!”

The guard stepped aside, and an ancient dwarf backed through the narrow opening, hauling a cartload of buckets with a rope. Well into the gateway he turned a silver-maned head and leveled an angry glare at all and sundry. “Well, the least somebody could do is open that door for me!” he grumbled. “You can see I have my hands full.”

A gateman started toward the little temporary door, but Willen Ironmaul was nearest it and waved the workman aside. “I agree, grandfather,” he said. “A person with his hands full deserves to have doors opened for him. What do you have there?”

The old dwarf glared at the chieftain of the Hylar, then shrugged. “Buckets of stuff,” he said at last. “I intend to mix them all together to see what happens. But, of course, I can’t do it inside Thorbardin. It’s getting so a person can’t do anything around here without somebody objecting.”

“What kind of stuff?” Willen wondered, raising his head to look into the buckets. They were filled with various substances, some black, some green, some yellow, and some of no describable color.

“Elements,” the ancient growled. “Brimstone, soot, leavened ash ... What business is it of yours, what kind of stuff? It’s my experiment, not yours! Who are you, anyway?”

“Mind your manners, old one!” someone reprimanded. “This is Willen Ironmaul, the chieftain of the Hylar.”

“Oh,” the oldster growled. “One of those. I don’t deal with Hylar. I live in Daebardin ... though I may move out if Olim Goldbuckle doesn’t apologize soon.” He turned back to his rope. “Well, if you intend to open the door for me, do it! I don’t have all day!”

Hiding a grin, the high chieftain of the Hylar bowed, stepped back, and pushed the door between the pillars open. Grumbling and

puffing, the old dwarf backed through it, pulling his cartload of buckets after him. Out on the wide parapet he turned east and disappeared toward the canted slopes beyond the sentinel towers.

Willen closed the door. "Who was that?" he asked.

Several of those around him shrugged and shook their heads. Bardion Ledge frowned thoughtfully, then snapped his fingers. "Pack Lodestone," he said. "I knew he looked familiar. He's the one the Daewar prince ordered out of Thorbardin."

"Ordered out?" Willen raised a brow.

"Oh, not permanently," Bardion amended. "It's just that he can't experiment with his elements inside anymore. The prince has ordered that he has to go outside to make his mixtures."

"I remember." Talc Bendiron nodded. "Pack Lodestone. He's the one who made the awful smell a month or so ago."

"That's him," Bardion said. "Olim told me about that. The old fellow mixed up some noxious potions and set fire to them in the concourse in Daebardin. Half the city stank of rotten eggs for a week."

"Why did he do that?" Willen wondered.

Bardion shrugged again. "Olim said he just wanted to see if his mixture would burn. Something about trying to invent a controllable fuel for the tinsmith forges, so he can get rich."

"A tinkerer." Barek Stone grinned. "Does he think he's a gnome?"

"Olim said Pack Lodestone is nearly three hundred years old," Bardion said. "At that age, there's no telling what he thinks he is."

Willen Ironmaul shook his head and returned to business. "I'll stamp my seal on this project," he told those around him. "I'm sure the rest of the council will, too. This is excellent work." He turned to the tower guard. "When will the Roving Guard arrive?"

"A few hours, Sire," the guard said. "They are on the climb-path now, coming toward this gate."

"Mace will want to report to the council," Willen said. "We had better get back to the cities and send runners to notify the chieftains."

He was just heading for the screw housing when a tremendous roar came from beyond the portal, rattling the little door in its

pillars. He and the rest turned, hurried to the door, and crowded out onto the ledge, the Ten drawing their blades.

To the east, on the slope beyond the sentinel tower where the approach to Northgate ended, a huge cloud of white smoke roiled upward, just beginning to spread on the winds. And out of the cloud stalked a black creature pulling a scorched cart on a rope. Pack Lodestone was covered with soot from head to toe. His disheveled, snowy hair and beard were black with it, and even at this distance they could hear his irate voice quavering. “Rust and corruption! That will never do! No tinsmith would put that in his forge! Now I’ll have to start all over again.”

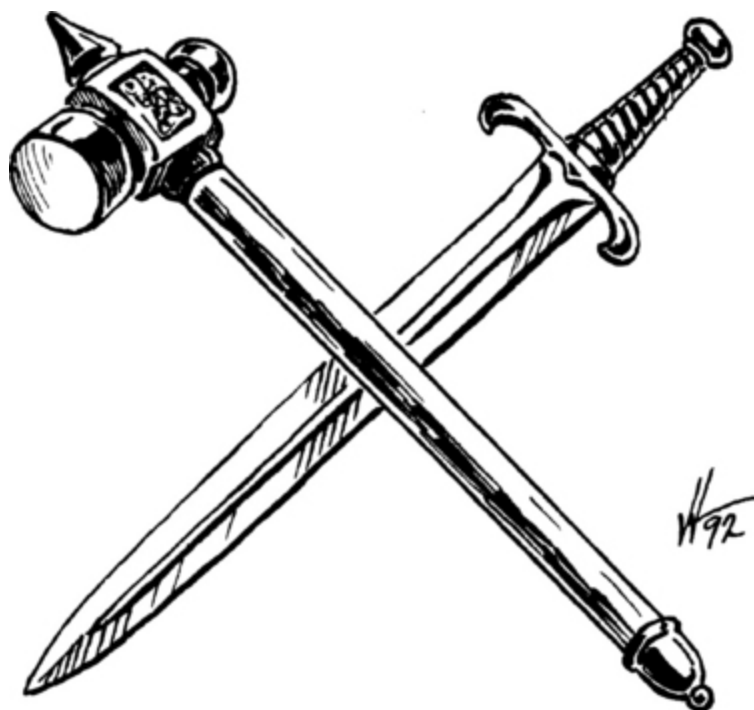
The crowd on the ledge parted to let him pass, and he grumbled all the way through the door and beyond, his voice fading as he disappeared past the housed gate-screw.

“I believe Olim Goldbuckle made a very wise decision,” Willen Ironmaul noted. “What was that? Magic?”

“Certainly not!” Bardion Ledge assured him. “Pack may be crazy as a tractor worm, but he would no more indulge in magic than you or I.”

“Well, whatever he did indulge in, it certainly was noisy.”

“And smelly,” someone said. Noses wrinkled as the errant wind brought a bit of smoke among them. “That smells exactly like rotten eggs!”



5

Realm of the Thanes

Because of the sheer size of underground Thorbardin, stretching nearly thirty miles from north to south, the assembling of a Council of Thanes took time. A minimum of three days—and more often five or six—was required for the formal, ceremonial assembly of the council members in the Great Hall of Audience. It was a cumbersome, tedious procedure to assemble the Council of Thanes. This time, the council's purpose was to hear the reports of Mace Hammerstand and the Neidar, Gran Stonemill, although within hours of their arrival at Northgate almost everyone in Thorbardin knew what they had come to report.

Something berserk, something elementally evil, was roaming the mountains, laying waste to scattered villages, killing everyone and everything in its path. Cale Greeneye and ten Neidar were on the track of the thing, but no one yet knew what it was or where it came from. It was a thing as big as a dragon that came in darkness, cloaked in mists. As big as a dragon, but—Mace Hammerstand and the rest who had gone to Windhollow all agreed—probably not a dragon. There was no sign that magic of any kind had been used, and dragons were fond of magic.

Further, Damon Omenborn had taken it upon himself to backtrack the beast westward. He had gone with two Guard volunteers and had not reported back. Mace was becoming increasingly worried.

And, finally, Gran Stonemill had reports of human magic-users running loose in dwarven territory, and a concern about Thorbardin's safety, because of some old, unused tunnel that most people had long since forgotten about.

It was Gran Stonemill's concern that prompted the unprecedented decision by Olim Goldbuckle, prince of the Daewar, and Willen Ironmaul, chieftain of the Hylar, to forgo the formal meeting of the thanes and take charge of the situation themselves. The threat Gran Stonemill suggested, if it were true, was unprecedented. In all the decades, Thorbardin had never been threatened by magic. In truth, hardly anyone had ever thought about such a possibility. But now there were wizards in Kal-Thax, and they were up to something.

Some of the Hylar had seen magic used in combat a long time ago, and the memories were frightening.

Olim Goldbuckle agreed. "There just isn't time to convene the thanes," the old Daewar prince announced to those around him on the Daebardin wharves. "I know that tunnel. It was my own delvers who made it."

"And sealed it later," the warden of ways reminded him. "Nothing has gone through that tunnel in nearly ninety years. It would take an army to get into the place, much less to come all the way here through it. There are seals practically every mile of its length."

"It is sealed, yes," Olim agreed, fierce blue eyes blazing in a face as weathered as old leather and framed by hair and beard that still held streaks of gold among the silver. "Sealed, but not against magic. Those seals don't have the craft that has gone into the gates. We didn't have such craft then, and who knows what a magic-user"—he shuddered in revulsion—"can do against simple barriers?"

A sizable crowd had grown on the piers and landings of the wharf complex, people from all over Thorbardin who had heard the rumors and knew that some of the leaders would be there, summoning the Thanes to formal council.

Adding to the crowd were long lines of porters, carrying bales of goods from the busy forges for transport to Southgate. For months, every forge in Daebardin and Theibardin had been busy turning out swords, shields, maces, and helms. Bell Brightluster, the warden of trade, had accepted the largest order for arms ever approved for trade to humans. No one knew why there was this sudden requirement for arms in southern Ergoth, but Bell Brightluster had a pledge and a rumor. The pledge was from the Orders of Chivalry of

Ergoth, that none of these armaments would be used against the dwarves. The rumor was that someone in Xak Tsaroth—someone of whom the knights approved—would be the recipient of the goods.

Now there was a babble of voices all around, and hundreds of dwarves crowded closer to hear.

But Quill Runebrand, keeper of the scrolls, stood looking aghast, first at Olim Goldbuckle and then at Willen Ironmaul. “But you can’t ...” he started, then cleared his throat. “You can’t just decide what will be done for all of Thorbardin, as you might for your own clans. That isn’t how it is done. The Covenant of the Forge very clearly states that all matters of importance must be decided by the assembled leaders of all the thanes, in council.”

“We haven’t decided anything yet, Quill,” Willen reminded him, “except that we may have an emergency on our hands and that there isn’t time to go through the procedures of a council.”

“But that’s like ... like taking it upon yourselves to lead Thorbardin!” Quill insisted. “Two chieftains can’t do that.”

“In an emergency,” Willen said stonily, “even two leaders are too many. It’s better if there is only one.”

Again Quill stared at his chieftain. “But then we’d have a king!”

“We’ll have no kings,” Olim Goldbuckle snapped. “We’ve always opposed kings.”

Barek Stone, captain general of forces, had been with the Hylar chief on his tour of Northgate, and was still present. He stepped forward now, bumping the fidgeting loremaster aside. “I’ll follow either of you,” he told Olim and Willen. “But not both. A command cannot have two masters.”

“You aren’t supposed to follow anybody, Barek!” Quill shouted. “You answer to the entire council, not to any one thane.”

Barek ignored him. “If mages find a way in here,” he told the two leaders, “there won’t be any council or anything for a council to govern. I have already commanded Gem Bluesleeve to place the elite guard in the north warren where the tunnel emerges. Mace Hammerstand will send the best units of his Roving Guard to the old citadel on Sky’s End, where it begins. Now I stand ready to take orders as to what we are to do there. *From somebody!*”

“They’re talking about disbanding the Council of Thanes!” People in the growing crowd spread the word.

“They’re talking about giving rule of us all to a king!”

“What king?” The question spread through the crowd. “A king from which thane?”

“Probably the Hylar,” some suggested. “They’re usually the best soldiers.”

“Soldier or not, I won’t bend the knee to any uppity Hylar!” many voices echoed.

“Well, certainly not a Daewar!” a burly, broad-shouldered Theiwar blurted. “I’ll worship lead before I proclaim any gold-molder as my sovereign.” He glanced around, then, as several Daewar blades and hammers in his vicinity were raised. “Hold on, now.” He raised his hands. “I’ve got as much right to my opinion as anybody else.”

“Not in Daebardin, you haven’t, cliff-hanger,” a Daewar delver sneered. “If there’s going to be a king here, I’ll support Olim Goldbuckle for the throne.”

“I’m going to see what Slide Tolec has to say about this,” another Theiwar snapped, turning away.

Willen Ironmaul heard the comment and shouted, “You there! Your chieftain should be on his way here right now. I sent word to all the chieftains as soon as I heard Gran’s report.”

“Well, in that case there will be a meeting of the thanes,” someone else in the crowd pointed out. “So what’s all the argument about?”

Willen Ironmaul sighed, glanced at Olim Goldbuckle and shrugged. “He’s right,” he said. “There will be a meeting.”

Again Quill Runebrand pushed his way to the front, his eyes blazing. “A meeting isn’t a council!” he hissed. “We don’t do business that way. To assemble the council, first there must be a general call, and bonded runners must carry the seals to all the thanes.... Well, all but the Aghar, since they aren’t easily found. Then the points of question must be encrolled and read by criers in all the concourses, and the council must assemble in the Hall of Audience so everybody who wants to can ...”

A powerful hand closed on Quill's neck, and he was lifted and turned to stare into the cold eyes of Barek Stone. "With all due respect," the captain general snarled, "shut up and stay out of the way. We have a situation here."

"Indeed we do," Olim Goldbuckle looked around thoughtfully at the growing crowd of dwarves on his wharf. There were thousands of them present now, and more coming. He turned to Barek Stone. "Turn the loremaster loose, Barek," he said.

When the seething keeper of scrolls was again standing on his own feet, Olim asked him, "You know the procedures by heart, I take it?"

"I certainly do!" Quill nodded. "It's my job."

"Then you certainly know the emergency clause in the Covenant, don't you?"

"Of course. It says that ... oh," Quill stammered, blinking. "Oh, yes. There is the emergency clause."

"And what does the emergency clause say?"

"It just says that in case of emergency the formalities can be dispensed with, and whatever chieftains can get together will decide what to do."

"Exactly." The prince of the Daewar nodded. "And we will do that now." He pointed. Out on the waters, a cable-boat was cutting a broad wake as boatmen hauled at their winches. In the bow was a large group of masked Daergar, with Vog Ironface at the forefront.

"That makes three," Willen noted. "And Slide is on his way."

"I'm here," a deep voice called. The crowds to the north parted as a company of Theiwar marched forward, led by Slide Tolec.

"Four," Willen Ironmaul counted. "Cale Greeneye is out, searching for that beast-thing, so the Neidar ..."

"Cale put me in charge," Gran Stonemill offered. "I can speak for the Neidar if I must."

"Five." Willen nodded. "How about Pakka Trune?"

"He and some other Klar are right behind us," the Theiwar chieftain said. "They'll be here soon."

"Six," the Hylar said. "Does anyone know where what's-his-name is? The Aghar Highbulp?"

“Probably asleep or lost,” someone sneered.

“Just the First.” Quill reminded his chieftain of the name of the gully dwarf leader.

“And one of him is enough,” someone nearby said. “If he doesn’t keep his people out of my root cellar, I’m going to start throwing rocks at them on sight.”

“Well, we won’t wait for him,” Olim said. “When Pakka Trune gets here we’ll meet ... ah, over there will do. Where the awnings are.”

“Good!” someone nearby snapped. “Then we can have a few decisions.”

“About what?” someone else wanted to know. “About who’s to be king?”

“No kings!” a hundred voices clamored, as others around them chimed in. “It better not be a Theiwar!” ... “I won’t stand for a Daergar king!” ... “No Daewar!” ... “Why would I want a Hylar king? I’m Theiwar!” ... “I’ll follow none but a Daergar.”

Slide Tolec had reached the other chieftains. Now the Theiwar gazed around, frowning. “We need a bit of wisdom here,” he said.

“We may need a miracle,” Barek Stone offered. “If these people can’t agree on anything, who is going to direct us if it turns out we really are in trouble?”

“You have guards in place on the tunnel, Barek,” Willen Ironmaul said. “Is it secure?”

“For the moment, yes.” The captain general nodded. “But if it is found by mages ... well, we don’t know what mages can do.”

“If action is needed, Olim can direct it.”

“Why me?” the Daewar prince snapped. “Why not you? Or Slide? Or ...”

“Don’t look at me,” Pakka Trune growled as he stepped up to take his place among the assembled leaders. “You know my people. I can barely control them, much less all of Thorbardin.”

“Well, then, why not Vog Ironface?” Olim pointed at the Daergar chieftain, just now pushing his way through the crowd.

“Why not me, what?” the Daergar demanded, his voice hollow behind his slitted iron mask.

“They’re trying to choose a king,” a frowning dwarf with twin cudgels snapped.

“We are not!” Olim Goldbuckle roared. “No kings! I’ve heard enough about kings!”

“Then what *are* you trying to do?” several nearby dwarves demanded.

“We’re trying to have an emergency meeting of the council,” Willen Ironmaul shouted angrily. Behind him, the Ten drew their weapons and spread to face the crowd in all directions.

“Who’s calling the meeting?” Quill Runebrand asked, getting out his quills and his paper.

“You heard the report first, Willen,” Olim suggested.

“You’re senior,” Willen snapped.

“Oh, all right! I, Olim Goldbuckle, prince of Thane Daewar, do hereby summon the Council of Thanes to emergency session!”

“To consider what?” Quill asked, his steel nib scratching away busily.

“Questions of state!” Olim roared.

“Of defense,” Willen reminded him.

“Reorx!” Barek Stone muttered.

Far in the distance, in the direction of the Warren Road, trumpets sounded, echoed by others nearer, then by others nearer still. The crowd went silent, and Barek Stone listened intently. His face went pale behind his beard.

“A new report,” he told the assembled chieftains. “Those three human wizards that escaped the Road of Passage ...”

“What about them?” Willen asked. “Are they found?”

“No, they haven’t been found. But there aren’t just three anymore. Riders at the Ergoth border say that more humans entered the road two days ago, and now they can’t be found. They’ve disappeared.”

“More wizards?” Olim Goldbuckle grimaced. “How many?”

“Many,” Mace said. “Maybe a hundred or more.”

* * * * *

Cale Greeneye and his Neidar volunteers had located a trail within a few miles of Windhollow. It was the trail of a creature, and

the trace itself told them something of what had made it. The thing was big, and it was heavy. Huge talons had gouged deep into the soil in some places, and had crushed small stones in others. It walked on two feet, and it had a long, twitching tail.

And sometimes, instead of walking, it flew. It had wings—scrapes on stone outcroppings said that the wings were barbed with talons of their own—and could fly, but it seemed never to fly very far. A few hundred yards here, to cross a chasm, a dozen yards or so there, to leap a cleft. Elsewhere the tracks led to the lip of a cliff and began again below as though the thing had soared downward, but not far out.

In one place, where it had flown over a thicket of scrub oak, the tops of trees were broken where it had passed.

“Either it prefers not to fly, or it isn’t very good at it,” Cale told his followers. “It doesn’t seek the heights, or spend much time on the wing.”

Eventually, they found a witness. An Einar herder, far out in search of stray goats, had been walking along the bottom of a crevice in late evening when he happened to look up and see something unusual—something large and nebulous—cross a clearing nearby.

He had seen it only briefly. “It was like a fog bank drifting by,” he told them. “Except that there was something inside the fog. I could hardly see it. Then a wind came, and for a moment the mists were swept back. I saw it then. It was gray, like steel. Not bright like Daewar steel, but darker, like Daergar blades. And it was big. It looked like a big lizard, but shaped more like a ... well, like a skinny turkey except that its head and neck were larger, and thrust forward, not up. Two legs, and two ... something like wings. And it had a great, long tail that shimmered like wet iron.”

“How big was it?” Cale asked the herder.

“About like this.” The dwarf paced off a distance of more than thirty feet. “Best I could tell, anyway. Maybe even bigger. It was hard to see, except when the fog was blown aside.”

“Was there other fog?”

“No, it was a clear evening. But there was fog around that thing. It wore fog the way I’d wear a fine cloak—if I had such a useless thing as a fine cloak. The fog went with it, and covered it.”

“What did you do?”

“Do?” The herder squinted at him. “I did what anybody would. I hid until it was gone.”

“Did you find your lost goats?” Crag Ironface asked.

“Three.” The herder frowned. “Or maybe four. Something had found them first, and there wasn’t enough left of them to tell.”

“Don’t look for the rest,” Cale told him. “Go home and warn your people. The thing you saw has wiped out three villages so far. Be on your guard, and if you see fog, scatter and hide.”

“Out here, I hide,” the herder said stubbornly. “If a thing like that comes to my home, I fight.”

“They fought at those villages, too,” Cale said, bleak-eyed. “They fought, and they died just like your goats died.”

“And still you Neidar are seeking it? What will you do when you find it?”

“I don’t know,” Cale admitted. “Kill it, if we can.”

For another day, the Neidar tracked the fog-thing. Then, in a deep hollow, as dusk shadows darkened, the thing found them.

The first warning came when Cale glanced up from the faint trail and noticed a mist settling over the hollow. Above, the sky was clear, but suddenly they were surrounded by deep mist turning to fog.

“Hist!” He raised a hand and reined in. “The thing is here ... somewhere. Keep your eyes open. Stay together.”

Their eyes strained as they backed their horses into a tight group. Weapons drawn, they scanned the dimming spaces around them. For long moments, they saw nothing. Suddenly dense fog swirled forward out of dark shadows, a cold, rolling fog that seemed to spring at them, as though to engulf them.

“Retreat!” Cale shouted. “Stay away from the fog!”

They backed their horses away, watching, then turned and ran as the fog bank surged toward them. Just behind them they heard a

sound that started as the hissing of wind, then grew to a shriek of rage.

“Spread and hold!” Cale commanded. Eleven horses pivoted and planted solid feet. In their saddles eleven dwarves leaned forward, shields up and weapons raised.

For an instant, the rolling mass of fog seemed to hesitate, as though considering the semicircle of dwarves. Abruptly, the shriek came again, this time a deep, rumbling roar that echoed from the hillsides. With the roar came a surge of fog as though a high wind were behind it. Thick mist engulfed three of the dwarves; from within came the sounds of blows being struck and cries of pain. A dwarf screamed. A horse shrieked in pain, then another. The sounds became sounds of ripping and tearing, of crushing of armor and bone.

“Attack it!” Cale shouted, putting hard heels to his horse. Hooves thundered, and eight Neidar spread, circled, and charged into the blinding mist. Cale drove six yards into blindness, then twelve, and suddenly saw a dark form ahead. Reining his mount aside, he closed and swung a mighty cut with his axe. The blade rang as though against steel, and something very large whisked past him just above his head. He pivoted, followed, and swung again.

This time the blade encountered a softer hardness, like chain mesh, and something roared in anger. He heard other blows being struck, but could see nothing. Then the roar of rage grew louder, and he looked up. Above the low mist, something reared high, a huge head with daggerlike teeth turning this way and that. Cale and someone else—he could not see who—charged in directly under the towering beast, swinging at its underbelly. But again it was as though the blades encountered stone or steel.

The thing reared again, seemed to pause, then pounced, and Cale saw a wide, grasping thing that might have been a foot or a ridged wing with talons drop down upon the dwarf next to him. Bones crunched, blood-mist spewed in the fog, and dwarf and horse were both ripped apart in an instant.

From somewhere a great tail swept around, barely missing Cale and his horse. They backed away. It was no use. They were trying to

fight something they could not even see. "Break and run!" he shouted. "Break free! Escape!"

As Cale cleared the mist, another rider was right behind him. He heard other hooves as well, going in another direction.

The fog bank swirled and roared, surging after them, then turned to pursue someone else. Halfway up the slope above the hollow, Cale slowed his horse, turned, and recognized Crag Ironface beside him. They looked back, and the fog was gone. Where it had been, Cale saw only shadows, but he heard the Daergar's gasp of shock as his miner's eyes saw what was there.

"Reorx!" Crag breathed. "I don't know how many we lost, Cale. Dwarves ... horses ... There's nothing whole down there. Only ... only sundered pieces!"

By morning light they reassembled, those who were left. Cale Greeneye, Crag Ironface, and a Theiwar youth, Pounce Tambac, who was afoot. He had outrun the fog-thing, even though his horse had fallen and been caught by it.

Out of eleven armed and mounted Neidar, only three remained. Three dwarves and two horses.

"Do you think we hurt that thing at all?" Crag asked grimly.

"No," Cale admitted. "No, I don't think we even scratched it. We've paid a heavy price, and it is still out there, going where it will."

"East." Crag pointed. "East, toward Thorbardin."

"A waste." Pounce Tambac frowned. "All for nothing."

"Not for nothing," Cale said. "We know about the thing now. We know what it can do, and a little of what it can't."

"What can't that thing do?" Pounce squinted at him.

"It doesn't move rapidly," Cale noted. "It's agile, but it's not very fast. Also, its wings aren't really wings. They're more like webbed claws. That's why it doesn't fly far or often ... it can't. And we know it can't see through its own fog. Not very well, anyway. It had to rear above it to find us."

"That's all very well," Pounce sighed. "But how do we kill it?"

"I don't know," Cale admitted. "We'll just have to think of something."

“Are we going after it again?” Crag asked. “The three of us?”
“No. That’s no use. We’ll have to get help.”



6

The Shadows of the Anviltops

For a long time, all was still on the sloping meadow that led down toward the breaks beyond which stood Sheercliff. An oval area the size of a small village had been burned and scorched as though by instant fire. Within it, a few blackened brush-stumps thrust up from the ashes, and in its center lay three still, smoke-dark forms. As the sun sank beyond the Anviltops, one of the forms stirred, moaned, and stirred again. After a time it sat upright, solemn eyes blinking in a smoke-blackened face capped by a seared helmet and framed by wisps of what had once been a thick beard.

Damon Omenborn had no idea what had happened. One moment he and his two escorts had been riding down a long slope with Sheercliff looming a few miles ahead; the next moment there had been searing light and intense heat, and then nothing. His throat was parched, and the exposed skin on his face, arms, and legs felt as though he had crawled across a working forge.

Slowly, gritting his teeth, he got to his feet, turning at the sound of a moan nearby. Someone else was still alive. He knelt beside the fallen figure, wondering who it was, then saw the ruined mesh faceplate still clinging to its strap even though the dwarf's helmet had fallen away. "Tag," he rasped, his voice as hoarse and rough as an anvil-crafter's file. "Tag, wake up."

The figure stirred, moaned, and muttered, "What happened? Did lightning hit us? Who ... Damon? Are you hurt?"

"Not too much," Damon said. "And you?"

"I've had better days," the Theiwar allowed. He struggled to a sitting position, staring around through the mesh that had probably

saved his light-sensitive eyes. “Where’s ... where’s that grinning Daewar?”

“Copper,” Damon muttered. He stood and looked around, then ran to where the third body lay. He knelt over it, then stood, turning away. Copper Blueboot was dead, his chest armor crushed. If he had survived the fire, he had not survived the fall. It looked as though his horse had rolled on him. And there was no sign of their horses anywhere.

“Dead,” Damon said. “He’s dead, and all the horses are gone, along with our packs and most of our gear.” Wiping soot from his eyes, he looked at the sky and at the world around him. “How could it have been lightning?” he wondered. “There were no clouds.”

“I remember something else,” Tag Salan said, getting to his feet. “Just before ... before whatever happened. It seemed as though the world turned around. We had been going west, and suddenly we were—we seemed to be—going south. What had been ahead was to our right.”

“But it wasn’t,” Damon corrected him. “It looked as though we had turned, but we hadn’t. And the terrain seemed odd. It didn’t look quite right, as though just beyond the turned-around view was another view, one that hadn’t changed.”

“That’s right,” Tag nodded. “I noticed that, too. And you insisted we go on, and when we did the turned-around view faded away, and things were as they had been. What was that?”

“I don’t know,” Damon admitted. “I’ve never seen anything like it.” He went and knelt again beside the body of Copper Blueboot. He closed the staring, lifeless eyes and crossed the Daewar’s arms over his mashed chest.

“Traveler,” the big Hylar murmured, “your travels are through. Everbardin opens its gates to you.”

Beside him, Tag Salan asked, “What was that?”

“Just something Hylar say.” Damon shrugged. “It comes from the old times, I guess, when some of us were Calnar, in a place far away.”

“He would want to be buried,” Tag said.

“Yes.” Damon stood again and prowled around the area, with Tag joining him. Not far from Copper’s body they found a few tools and a coil of hemp cable, probably thrown from a pack when the horses bolted. The tools, like the weapons and gear they carried on them, were scorched but usable—a stone chisel, a pick, and a prybar. Damon chose the chisel for himself and unslung his hammer and shield. He handed the pick to Tag. “Here, where he fell,” he said. “The stone is thin, and there are soft layers below where we can dig with our shields. “We’ll bury him here.”

They worked into the night, burying the Daewar youth, then shared the remaining water in Damon’s sling-pouch and sat down to rest. Suddenly Tag Salan pointed and jumped to his feet. “There!” he shouted. “There it is again.”

Damon stood, squinting. Moments passed, and a brief light blazed in the distance, atop the towering wall of Sheercliff. More moments passed, then there was another flash. After that, there was only darkness.

“Someone or something is up there,” Damon said. “Those are the same flashes we saw earlier. Three of them, like before, then nothing.”

“Three different colors,” Tag added. “I didn’t notice it before, but one flash—the first one—had a hint of red in it. The second was white, and the third more blue. Did you see that?”

“I couldn’t perceive a difference,” Damon admitted. “But then, your Theiwar eyes are better than mine after dark.” He paused. “Blue, you said? The third flash looked blue?”

“A little,” the Theiwar told him.

“Like the light that burned us,” Damon murmured. “In the instant that I saw it, it seemed blue.” Again they sat, and Damon said thoughtfully, “This is where that thing—the killing thing—must have come from. Somewhere over there. But those people in the village said nothing about flashes of light. I wonder what it is.”

“Back there, at Windhollow, your uncle set off with ten Neidar to search for the beast,” Tag said. “The rest of the Neidar went in another direction. Where were they going?”

“To the Road of Passage,” Damon said. “They’d been told about some human wizards getting off the road. But ...” he paused, feeling a tingling in his scalp and spine. His gaze fixed on the far-off top of Sheercliff. “Wizards,” he hissed. “Magic! Do you suppose ...?”

“Do you suppose that was magic that hit us, Damon?” Tag growled. “Somebody deliberately attacked us ... with *magic*?”

“I’ve never seen magic.” Damon shrugged. “But it could have been. If it was, we’d better do something about whoever is using it.” In his voice was no sign of the anger that Tag felt, and the Theiwar wondered again what it would take to arouse the big Hylar’s ire.

“I guess it didn’t kill us,” Tag said. “Not yet, anyway.”

“If someone used magic on us, then whoever used it could see us. And they might see us again, out here on this open slope. How do you feel about night travel?”

“I like it better than you do,” the Theiwar reminded him. “Of course, I’m no Daergar, who can count footprints in a dark mine shaft, but I can see all right by moonlight.”

“Then I think we had better be on our way. By morning, we can be in those breaks below the cliff. We’ll rest then, with cover.”

* * * * *

Wide-eyed with terror, Willow Summercloud clung desperately to the little straps of Cawe’s harness as the great bird soared higher and higher into the sky. The harness was nothing more than tied loops of soft leather, fore and aft of the raptor’s wings, connected by a single strip of what seemed to be discarded linen, casually tied with knots that looked as though they would fail at any moment.

The first takeoff had nearly been a disaster. The kender girl, Shill, hadn’t bothered to explain to the dwarf how one stays on the back of a bird, and Cawe was no more than fifty feet above the ground when Willow’s booted feet slipped on slick feathers, and she fell past a huge wing, only saving herself by grasping and clinging to a huge, taloned toe underneath.

In the landing, she had been rolled, tumbled, and thoroughly aggravated. But she had finally agreed to try it one more time when Shill showed her how to sit just behind the great wings, using the

linen strap as a handhold and her legs and feet as braces. Now Willow shook windblown hair out of her eyes, glanced downward, and wished that she had decided to walk. Below, the world was far away and tiny. Peaks and valleys looked like little furrows in poorly plowed fields, and what the dwarf knew to be tall trees on the lower slopes seemed nothing more than bits of brush.

“We’re too high!” she shouted, hearing the wind carry her words away behind her.

In front of her the little kender turned and said, “What?”

“We’re too high!” Willow repeated. “I don’t like it up here! You promised me that this bird would fly low and slow!”

“Oh.” Shill grinned. “Well, for Cawe, this is low and slow. He doesn’t fool around when it comes to flying.”

“I certainly hope not,” Willow breathed.

“Of course, if he decides to do flips and rolls and stunts like that, it gets kind of exciting....”

“No!” Willow shrieked.

“What?”

“No flips and rolls! No stunts! This is bad enough.”

“I guess you’re not a frequent flier,” Shill decided. “Well, don’t worry, this is just a quick tour so you can see what those wizards have been doing. Oh, look!” She pointed downward, half-standing precariously on the shoulders of the soaring bird. “I see people down there, riding horses. Are those some more dwarves, do you think?”

Carefully clinging to the fragile strap, Willow leaned outward and looked down. A dizzying distance below, three little specks moved slowly down a wide slope.

“Well?” Shill insisted. “Are they dwarves?”

“Who can tell from up here?” Willow snapped. “Sit down before you fall!”

Shill looked puzzled for a moment, then sat. “I thought they might be somebody you know,” she said. “Dwarves know other dwarves, I suppose.”

“Sit still and hang on!” The rear knot in the linen strap slipped, and Willow grabbed it with her free hand. “Who in the world tied

this ... this thing?"

"I did," Shill said happily. "Pretty neat, huh? When Cawe wanted me to go with him to look for a dwarf, I thought it would be a good idea. Of course, I didn't have much to work with, but it turned out just fine. Isn't this fun?"

Bracing herself, Willow quickly retied the knot, then grasped the linen again as Cawe banked to the left, still gaining altitude. The world below was getting smaller and smaller.

"That's Sheercliff ahead." The kender girl pointed. "It was named Sheercliff by dwarves. Dwarves aren't all that imaginative. If it had been me, I'd have called it Verty-Go or Upson Downs or something fancy like that, but I guess Sheercliff is all right. I remember once, my mother caught a weasel, and I named it ..."

Willow tried to ignore the kender's prattling, squinting as she gazed at the miles-long cliff that stood like a huge wall of stone facing the eastward slopes. Behind its edge, to the west, were plateau lands sloping gently upward toward the still distant Anviltop Peaks. And on the plateau was an ugly black scar that looked as if it was half a mile across. "What's that?" she asked.

Shill looked and shook her head. "I don't know. It wasn't there when we came by before. It looks like there's been a fire."

"It certainly does," the dwarf girl agreed.

"Oh, look! There those people are. See? Right out there on the edge of the cliff. All three of them. They're the ones who have been doing the flashings and the cracks and thunders and all that."

Willow could barely see the three men so far below; they were just little specks on the very lip of the cliff. She squinted, then asked, "Do you suppose we could go down for a closer look?"

The kender trilled something in her bird-tongue, and the great bird answered—a single, deep-chested syllable.

"Cawe says no." Shill shrugged. "He says those people are no friends of his, and he doesn't want to have anything to do with them. He says that's why you're here. He wants you to figure out what to do about them."

"He said all that?" Willow's eyes widened.

"Well, not in so many words, but that's what he meant."

“Well, I haven’t the vaguest idea what to do about his wizards, and that’s not why I’m out here anyway. I’m looking for a thing that raided my village and killed almost everybody there.”

Shill turned bright, curious eyes on her passenger, and Willow noticed that the little kender was up again, shifting from one foot to the other as though dancing to the sound of Cawe’s wings.

“Stay still!” the dwarf demanded. “You’re making me nervous!” Willow turned away, then blinked as bright light flashed on a mountain slope far behind them.

Shill had seen it, too, and jumped up and down excitedly, precariously balanced on the back of the soaring bird. “See that?” she asked, pointing. “It’s those wizards. They’re doing it again.”

The flash was gone in an instant, but smoke rolled upward from where it had been.

At that moment, Cawe spread wide wings, tilted his glide, and headed downward. Shill’s feet went out from under her, and she plunged over the side. With a gasp, Willow let go of the linen strap, caught a toe under one of the body straps, and lunged. Her fingers closed around a small wrist, and she heaved backward, lifting the kender back onto the bird.

“I told you to sit down!” Willow shrilled.

“Wow!” Shill chirped. “That was exciting!” She crawled back to her place ahead of the dwarf and crouched there, her eyes shining.

The great bird had circled far past the crest of Sheercliff and now was circling downward, toward forested slopes above the plateau. Shill trilled, then turned back. “You said you wanted to get a closer look,” she said. “Cawe is going to let us off in those timbers, so we can do that.”

“Let us off?” Willow frowned. “I hope he intends to land first.”

“Oh, sure. He always lands. That’s where he lets me off when I watch the wizards. I’ve been there several times already. Of course, I try not to let them see me, because they don’t seem very friendly. But they leave interesting things lying around sometimes, that I guess they don’t want anymore. I have a chalice, and a blackstone shiny thing, and a pair of shoes that I don’t have the vaguest idea what to do with because they won’t fit anybody I know. Oh, and I

found several carved sticks with little drawings and runes on them. They were just sticking up out of the ground here and there.”

Undisturbed by the chattering, fidgeting pair on his shoulders, Cawe braced great wings and aimed for a wooded cleft in the slopes above the plateau.

* * * * *

Many miles to the east of Sheercliff, late in the evening, a man trudged along the bank of a little mountain stream, heading generally eastward. He was tall, lithe, and muscular, with dark eyes above a full dark beard—eyes that seemed constantly on the move, missing very little of what was around him. The sword at his back, the rawhide shield at his shoulder, and the strung bow in his hand were always ready for use. He was an intruder in the dwarven lands, and he fully understood that to be caught by the reclusive dwarves, wandering in their territory, meant at the very least a quick expulsion from the land called Kal-Thax. *At least* expulsion, he reminded himself, but more likely death. The dwarves did not appreciate outsiders.

Still, Quist Redfeather had come, pledged to a mission that he detested, but nonetheless meant to complete. Too much hung in the balance for the Cobar to even consider failure.

“If any man can get past the borders of Kal-Thax,” the High Overlord of Xak Tsaroth had told him, “I have no doubt that you are the man. And I have no doubt that, with your family in our, ah, tender custody pending your return, you will make every effort to succeed.”

The “mission” was simple, if not easy. The overlords of Xak Tsaroth had long coveted the wealth of the dwarven clans inhabiting the Kharolis Mountains but had been unable to send troops past the perimeters of Kal-Thax because of the ferocity of the dwarves’ defenses. For decades the idea of conquest had been set aside, but now the High Overlord was plotting again. With the passing of years the extravagance of the rulers of Xak Tsaroth had increased, until the demand for new riches and new revenues was overwhelming. But those very demands now had curtailed much of

the city's income, as more and more of the people of southern Ergoth rebelled against exorbitant taxation and brutal tactics.

Even the knightly orders of Ergoth tended more and more to sympathize with the rebels, against the power of the great city-state of Xak Tsaroth. The knights—the strongest unified force in the realm—had not so far actually joined any rebellions, but more and more they worked to thwart the slavers and tariff-takers who went out from the city to loot and plunder from the common people of Ergoth.

Even the High Overlord of Xak Tsaroth was reluctant to denounce the knightly orders, so he looked for other sources of wealth, and there, just to the west, rose the peaks of the dwarven lands, rich in minerals, forests, fields, and commerce. Here again, though, it was commerce in which Xak Tsaroth had no direct part. The only trade treaty between humans and dwarves was the treaty the thanes had made with the orders of knighthood. In all commerce between Ergoth and Kal-Thax—or Thorbardin, as many now called the whole land—the knights were the agents and intermediaries. The dwarves flatly refused to have dealings with Xak Tsaroth and the overlords.

So the High Overlord sought another alliance. Beyond Kal-Thax, to the west, were other human realms, including the western Ergothian lands ruled by the emperor of Daltigoth.

The High Overlord had chosen carefully, in selecting Quist Redfeather. Few humans had the Cobar's knowledge of the wilderness, his talent for strategy, and his skill with weapons. The High Overlord knew Quist to be one of the leaders of the free Cobar who had almost succeeded in bringing down the overlords themselves.

The attempt had almost succeeded, but at the last moment something had gone wrong. Soldiers of Xak Tsaroth had scattered the invading Cobar, capturing many of their leaders. Most of those now, of course, were dead—beheaded at the pleasure of the overlords. The rest had been sent away as slaves to be bartered in trade as far east as Istar. Only Quist Redfeather and his family had been spared, Quist to undertake a mission for the overlords, and his family to be held hostage as a guarantee of his cooperation.

The mission was simple. Quist was to journey directly across the dwarven realm to the lands beyond and present to the king there the High Overlord's proposal for a pact between Xak Tsaroth and Daltigoth, on each side of the dwarves, to join forces and conquer them, and then to split the profits.

He could not cross on the dwarven Road of Passage, because he might be searched and the proposals found. It was assumed that something like that had befallen the overlord's first such emissary several years before. The emissary had simply disappeared, somewhere between Xak Tsaroth and Daltigoth. So Quist must avoid the road. He must go alone, through the lands around Thorbardin and the wilderness beyond.

And he did not even have a horse, because no horseman could have made it unseen through eastern Kal-Thax, where the dwarves were everywhere. It was almost the worst of insults, having to journey on foot. The Cobar were horsemen, probably the finest horsemen in all of Ergoth. A Cobar without his horse, it was said, was only half a Cobar.

Quist had journeyed afoot halfway across Kal-Thax. The settled lands were behind him, but there was still a long way to go.

Then, on this evening, Quist Redfeather had a stroke of luck. Rounding a bend in the streambed he stopped, faded into the underbrush, then stared. Just ahead, in a little clearing, stood three tired and lathered horses that could only be runaways.

His fierce eyes brightened as he studied them. Fine animals, they were saddled and rigged, but not with human gear. The small saddles with their high stirrups were dwarven work, as was the light, oiled mail of their saddle skirts.

But a saddle could be modified.

Through the night, Quist Redfeather kept watch on the stray horses. No one came to collect them; they were alone. With morning he gathered them in, removed their gear, and went to work to outfit one of them for himself.



7

A Time of Testing

The morning sun was still behind the eastern peaks when Damon Omenborn and Tag Salan reached the foot of Sheercliff. From the rising slopes below the massive wall, they scanned the cliff's face—miles of sheer, precipitous stone standing above slopes that in some places rose to within fifty feet of the lip, but in other places were three times that below it. The cliff was not a flat wall, as it appeared from a distance. The stone was weathered and rough, and the line of the cliff curved in and out erratically. But much of it was visible from the approaching slopes, and by first light of dawn Tag saw something interesting a mile or so south of where they had approached.

"The slope has fresh-broken stone atop the old rubble," he pointed out. "As though someone has been digging. Let's take a look."

"You look." Damon nodded. "I'm going up there. I want to see what's atop this wall before the sun tops the horizon."

"Have a care, Damon," Tag warned him. "If those wizards are up there, as you suspect, they won't welcome you."

"Have a care, yourself," Damon told him. "Don't forget what we came here to find in the first place. Where that thing came from, there might be others like it."

"I'll just have a look over there where the rubble is, then follow you up." Tag turned and trotted away, south along the foot of the cliff.

Slinging his hammer and shield on his back, Damon selected a place and began to climb. For a human, scaling such a wall without pitons and line would have been almost impossible. But Damon was not human. He was a dwarf, and like most dwarves he had learned

to climb almost before he learned to walk. The rugged face of the cliff offered handholds and toeholds in abundance, until he was within twenty feet of the top. Then, suddenly, he came to smooth stone.

“Wind-scour,” he muttered. Reluctantly, he unslung his hammer and began to make his own holds, chipping away expertly at the rock, hoping that the sound would not carry to anyone who might be up there.

The climbing was slower now, since he needed to pause at each hold to make another one above, but he kept going and soon was striking his final hold just below the brushy rim of the escarpment. When it was completed he slung his hammer again, pulled himself up, and peered over—directly into bright eyes in a small, curious face beneath a tied pile of flowing hair.

“Hello, there!” the creature said softly. “You made so much noise that I was afraid you might wake up those wizards, but I guess you didn’t.”

With a heave, Damon pulled himself over the edge of the cliff, stared for a moment at the chatty little thing, then rose to a crouch and gazed around.

“Oh, good!” the small creature said. “Another dwarf! Well, you’ll be useful, I imagine. You’re a lot bigger than my dwarf. Of course, she’s just a girl. Do you have a sword or a spear or anything? Or just that hammer? My dwarf has an axe.”

Crouching, Damon scanned the terrain carefully. Not far away, a hundred yards back from the cliff’s edge and just north of him, was what appeared to be a camp. A long, sagging shelter of saplings and layered brush was surrounded by a jumble of tied packs, cut poles, and various crude vessels. Beyond, the grassy flat was burned and blackened for several hundred yards, almost to the wooded slope that climbed away toward distant peaks. The mesa was narrow here, encroached by a shoulder of the nearest mountain.

Beside him, almost at his shoulder, the creature with the tied hair chattered on happily in a high, musical voice. “... waiting for me over there in those trees,” it said. “Of course, Cawe isn’t there. He

let us off higher up the slope, and he's probably gone on up to tell the others that we brought help."

Damon ignored the chatter. At the brush shelter, he saw movement, and someone stepped out into the slanted sunlight. It was a man, a tall, skinny human male with a long, untended gray beard and a head that was bald except around the edges. As he stepped out into the sunlight and straightened, he donned a dirty, smoke-stained pointed hat that might once have been white. His attire was equally filthy, a long, loose white robe, belted at the waist with a piece of rope. The robe might once have hung to the ground, but it looked as though the hems had been burned away. It fell to midcalf only, exposing a pair of thin, awkward legs and two very large feet in sandals.

"... usually wakes up first," the high voice at Damon's shoulder chattered. "I don't think he sleeps as well as the others. But they'll be up before long. Then you can decide what to do about them. My dwarf doesn't seem to have any good ideas."

At the brush shelter, the robed man yawned, scratched vigorously under one arm, and turned toward a pile of sticks a few steps away. He started toward it, then seemed to change his mind. Raising a long, thin arm he held it before him for a moment, then pointed a commanding finger at the pile of sticks. Obediently, several bits of wood atop the stack rose into the air, turned this way and that, then drifted toward the man to fall at his feet, arranging themselves into a cone of kindling. The man said something, and the kindling burst into flame.

Damon realized that his mouth was open and closed it with a click of hard teeth. Magic! The wizards everyone was looking for were here, on Sheercliff! He had found them.

"... might be best for the two of you to talk it over," the chattering voice was saying. "That's a good idea. I'll go get my dwarf, and the two of you can make a plan."

Damon shuddered in revulsion. He had never seen magic before and had never wanted to. But now he was sure that whatever had happened to him and his companions, causing the death of Copper Blueboot, had indeed been an act of magic. His brows lowering in

distaste, he grunted, then glanced around, suddenly aware of what the chattering voice at his shoulder had been saying.

“Dwarf?” he said. “What dwarf?”

But there was no one there. Whoever and whatever the small creature was, it was gone.

“What was that all about?” Damon muttered. He shifted to a better position, eased the slings on his shield and hammer, and turned his attention again to the camp. Three wizards. One was awake, and the other two would be awake soon. Even as he thought it, a second man stepped out of the lean-to, straightening and stretching long arms in the early sunlight. Though not quite as tall as the first one, this man looked stronger. He was wide-shouldered and sturdy, and his posture was that of a strong, athletic person. Under a wide-brimmed brown hat, his face was full-bearded, a substantial brush of brown whiskers that would have done justice to a dwarf.

He wore a shortcoat of tanned hide with a fur collar and wide fur cuffs. His leggings were of simple buckskin, and he wore high, sturdy boots. The only element of bright color in his garb was the wide shoulder-sling of his leather pouch. The sling strap was dyed bright red.

He went to the woodpile, gathered an armload of sticks, and returned to the little fire. Squatting easily, he laid sticks across the fire, then set a metal pot atop them, poured water into it from a flask, and began peeling a potato.

Behind him, a third man stepped from the shelter, hunched and scuttling in a crablike shuffle as he walked past the others to turn full around, shading his eyes with a pale hand. Damon could see little of his features. A floppy black hat shaded him, and the high collar of his dark, full coat hid his face. Below the coat, a stained robe hung nearly to the ground.

As the dark one turned toward Damon, he paused, then leaned to peer harder. Damon froze in place, hidden in the brush. He felt as though the human was looking directly at him. After a moment, though, the man continued his full-circle scrutiny, then stepped to the fire and sat beside it, warming his hands.

Damon waited long minutes, but nothing further occurred. The three at the fire were simply preparing breakfast. Rather, the one with the red strap was preparing breakfast, while the other two waited for it. The dark one sat there warming his hands, and the tall skinny one was removing things from a pack. At first Damon supposed they might be dishes, but then the man held one up, studying it, and it caught the sun's rays. It was a mirror. The man was unpacking mirrors.

When he was certain that there were no more humans in the group, Damon made up his mind. Though wilderness, this was still dwarven land, and these people were trespassers. Crouching, moving carefully, he worked his way to a patch of brush only yards from the camp, then with shield and hammer in hand he stood and stalked toward them.

"You people don't belong here!" he said sternly.

Three surprised faces turned toward him. The dark-coated one scooted back, hissing an oath. The white-robe squeaked, stumbled over his own feet, and dropped one of his mirrors. It shattered on the ground. The one squatting by the fire turned, gazed curiously at the armed dwarf, then carefully set aside his potato and knife, and stood. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"We don't pardon those who trespass in Kal-Thax," Damon said levelly. "And especially not those who attack us. Do you deny doing a magic to us yesterday that cost the life of a friend of mine?"

"You ..." The dark scuttler got to his feet, staring at Damon in disbelief. "Are you telling us that you are one of those? That's preposterous! I killed all three!"

"So it was you," Damon rumbled. "Well, you did kill one of us, wizard. Copper Blueboot is dead. His horse fell on him. You have that to answer for. That"—he looked at each of them, one after another—"and trespassing on lands held by the thanes of Thorbardin. What are you doing here?"

The dark, hunched one hissed again and began a chant of some sort, but the leather-clad one hushed him. Turning back to Damon, he said, "My name is Megistal. This is Tantas, and over there is Sigamon. We are here because ..."

“Shut up!” the white-robe snapped. “We agreed not to tell anyone about that!”

“Well, we’ve been found!” Megistal snapped back. “This one’s questions deserve answers.” He tipped his head, studying Damon carefully. “So you are a dwarf,” he said. “I haven’t ever seen one up close. Are you really one of those that Tantas killed ... or thought he killed?”

“I *did* kill them!” Tantas rasped. “I know what went into my spell, and those dwarves are dead. No one could have lived through that.”

“You aren’t answering my questions,” Damon pointed out.

“We are surveyors,” Megistal said, his hands hushing the other two. “Surveyors for the Orders of High Sorcery. We are here to prepare a site for a Tower of High Sorcery.”

“This is where we will build it,” the white-robed one chirped. “It will be good for everyone.”

“Like rust you will,” Damon assured the man. “No tower, no sorcery, no *humans* on dwarven property. You are not welcome here.”

“And who are you to command us?” Megistal asked.

“I am Damon Omenborn, of Thane Hylar of Thorbardin.”

“And what is your authority in such matters?”

“I live in this land,” Damon said levelly. “You don’t.”

“Is that your name for this land, then? Thorbardin?”

“This land is Kal-Thax. Thorbardin is its fortress. Now ...” With his hammer, he pointed at Megistal, and then at the glaring Sigamon. “You and you, I ask you once, politely, to pack your possessions and leave Kal-Thax as quickly as you can, by the way you came. Leave, and don’t come back.” Turning to Tantas, he added, “*You* won’t be leaving. Copper Blueboot was my friend, and I claim right of challenge.”

“You claim *what*?” Tantas stared at him. “Are you ... do you mean to challenge me?”

“You are challenged,” Damon said.

With a hiss, Tantas muttered, “*Mordit tat!*” He pointed a stiff finger at the dwarf. “*Chapak!*”

Instantly a large sword appeared in the air directly in front of Damon and slashed at him. He caught it on his shield, deflecting it, and it disappeared with a pop and a puff of dark smoke.

“Magic,” Damon Omenborn mumbled to himself. “That seemed like a sword. But it was no sword. It was only magic.”

Tantas gaped at the dwarf. “Impossible!” he grumbled. Again he voiced a sharp command, and a steel-tipped arrow drove into Damon’s breastplate, piercing his armor. The impact of it tumbled him backward.

An agony like none he had ever felt tore through Damon, driving the breath from his lungs and the sight from his eyes. The arrow had pierced him through. But how could it be an arrow? No bow had flung it. “Magic,” he gasped, fighting for control of the pain that seared within him. “There is no arrow. Magic is only magic, nothing more.”

Tantas gaped again. The fallen dwarf was getting to his feet. He stood looking down at the glistening shaft standing in his breast. Pain shone in his eyes, but at the same time something else kindled there. The dwarf’s jaws tightened, and his eyes narrowed. “I only imagine this,” he whispered. “It is not real.” Gritting his teeth, he struck the shaft with the edge of his shield. The arrow broke and disappeared as the sword had.

“I don’t believe this!” Tantas shrielled. Frantically, he began another spell, this one far more elaborate.

“That’s enough,” Damon growled. More quickly than a human could have imagined possible, he swung his hammer and threw it. Tantas tried to duck aside, and the other mages tried to weave spells, but it was too late. The big hammer hummed through the air, struck the dark wizard directly in the face, and carried him backward to sprawl flat on the hard ground.

Stunned and shocked, the other two wizards hurried to their companion, knelt beside him, and pulled back his high collar. Inside, where there had once been a face, now there was only blood oozing from smashed features.

“He’s dead!” Sigamon screeched. “The dwarf killed him!”

Damon stepped past them, retrieved his hammer, and wiped it clean on the fallen wizard's sleeve. "He accepted my challenge," he said flatly. "He lost. Now, you two, I'll give you one hour to pack your things."

In a rage, Sigamon stood, whirled toward the dwarf, and threw a spell that sizzled from both of his hands like burning ice. Again the dwarf was thrown to the ground, and this time his shield and hammer were torn from his grip.

Dimly, he heard Megistal say, "Sigamon, don't! This is a phenomenon we must study. Somehow this creature has resisted magic. We must know how!"

"No!" Sigamon panted, holding his spell in place as Damon struggled against it. "No, he's far too dangerous. Maybe magic won't kill him, but falling from a cliff will. Stand back!"

Struggling, trying to break free of the searing pain of the spell that held him, Damon felt himself rise and saw the ground move beneath him. Slowly he began to float toward the edge of Sheercliff. He gritted his teeth, waved and kicked, and abruptly fell to the ground. But before he could get to his feet the spell had him again, lifting him. Turning and tumbling in the air, he had a glimpse of the bulging eyes, the straining features of the white wizard. Sigamon was putting every ounce of his strength into his magic.

Megistal backed away, shaking his head. Sigamon summoned all his energy and concentrated on his spell. The dwarf's resistance was incredible. He should have been instantly thrown out past the ledge, but instead it was all Sigamon could do to float him slowly toward the drop. As he concentrated with all his will, someone tugged at his robe.

"Excuse me," a high-pitched voice said. "Your pot has fallen over in the fire."

The spell snapped, the dwarf clattered to the ground, and Sigamon sagged, panting and sweating. Beside him stood a small person, no taller than his hip, gazing up with excited, happy eyes.

"A ... kender," Sigamon panted. "A ... blasted ... kender!"

"Hello," she said. "I'm Shill."

Megistal stared at the kender, then glanced up and shouted, "Sigamon! Watch out!"

Before the white-robe could react, something very solid and strong crashed into him, doubling him over and carrying him backward. Arms as thick as oak branches and as hard as quarried stone circled him, squeezing the breath from his lungs. The tall mage was carried backward a dozen feet, then lifted high, spun around, and thrown to the ground. Before he could move, the dwarf was on him, pinning his arms behind his back. Powerful fingers locked themselves in the sparse hair behind his bald pate, lifted his head, and slammed it down.

Sigamon passed out.

Amazed and fascinated, Megistal watched the dwarf stand away from the wizard and rub his hands together as though to wash away filth.

Damon turned to the third wizard. "I suppose I'll have to deal with you, too," he said.

"I can hardly let this go unresolved." Megistal shrugged, almost apologetically. "But tell me, why aren't you dead? You should be dead. Those spells were very powerful."

"Spells," Damon sneered. "Magic. I don't like magic."

"Well, whether you like it or not, I don't understand how you managed to resist it as you did. Didn't their spells hurt you?"

"They hurt," Damon growled. "Like nothing I've ever felt, they hurt. But they weren't actually ... real. They were just magic."

"Magic is real!" Megistal protested. "Don't you know that? Magic can ... Here, I'll show you." He muttered a few syllables and raised his hand. Nearby, the brush lean-to shivered, grew, and became a tall stone tower. Megistal pointed at it. "What do you see there?"

"Magic," Damon admitted. "I see a tower ... and a brush shelter. The tower is just an illusion."

"You're right." The mage nodded. He snapped his fingers, and the tower disappeared. "That was only illusion, but this isn't." Again he spoke words, and the brush shelter raised itself from the ground, soared like a bird high overhead, and settled to earth again several

hundred yards away. "That was no illusion," Megistal said. "That was true movement."

"I guess it was," Damon admitted. "It was still magic, though. And magic is something we don't want in Kal-Thax. Are you going to leave?"

"Fascinating," the wizard muttered. "A mixture of acceptance and disbelief, of realization and revulsion, and under it all, just plain stubbornness. Are you one of a kind, or are all dwarves like you?"

"I don't know," Damon growled. "Now, get out of Kal-Thax!"

"Well, I've enjoyed talking to you," the wizard said. "You have taught me something that I didn't know. And I really don't blame you about Tantas and Sigamon. Tantas is good riddance, as far as I'm concerned, and Sigamon deserved what he got. I'm really sorry that I must ... *Mordes motem! Chapak!*"

Caught completely off-guard, Damon felt himself lifted and flung toward the cliff.

"Surprise defeats stubbornness," Megistal said to himself questioningly. Then something hummed behind him, and a fist-sized stone bounced off the back of his head. The wizard sighed, his knees buckled, and he sagged to the ground. At the very lip of the cliff, Damon dropped, tumbled, and went over, clawing and struggling. For a moment he clung to the edge; then a small, strong hand grasped his wrist, and an irate voice snapped, "Well, don't just dangle! Climb!"

With assistance, Damon pulled himself to safety, got to his knees, and looked directly into the wide-set eyes of Willow Summercloud.

"You!" he gasped.

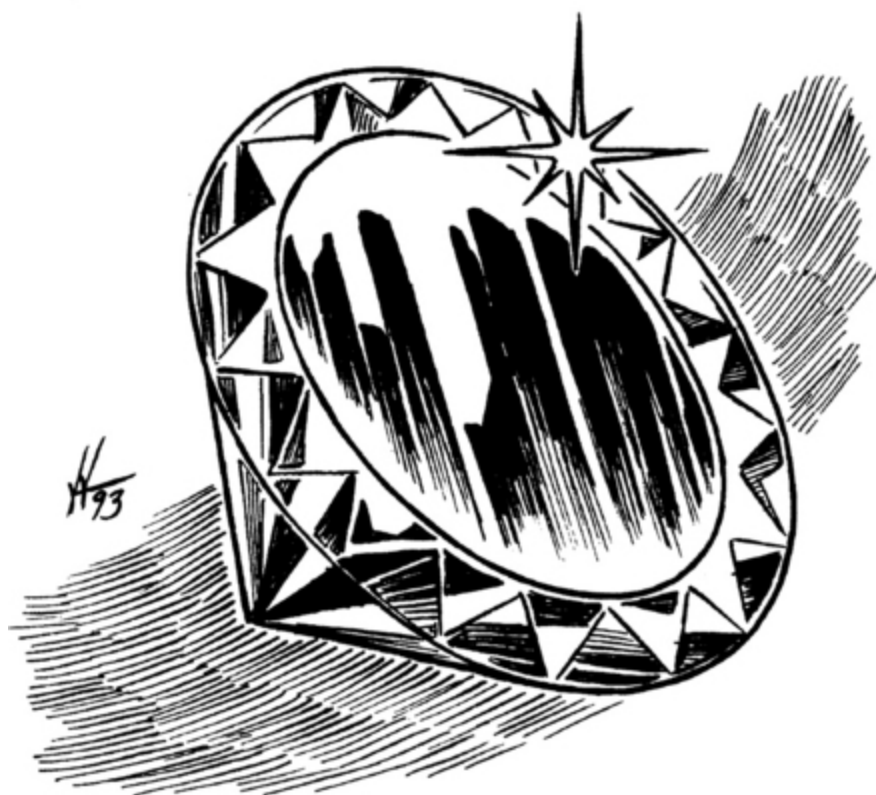
"You might at least say thanks," she pointed out. "If I hadn't popped that man with a sling-stone, you'd be ..."

"Thanks," he said, getting to his feet.

At the edge of the cliff, the little kender teetered precariously, looking down. "Wow!" she shrilled. "That was pretty close. Aren't you glad I brought my dwarf? This is ..." She glanced around. "Oh, do you two already know each other?"

Damon peered at the fallen Megistal curiously. The man had tried to kill him, that was certain. But just in that instant, the dwarf had

sensed a reluctance, as though the wizard was not trying nearly as hard as he might.



8

The Lorekeeper's Omen

Tag Salan knew, within minutes of entering the crevice under Sheercliff, that he had found what they came to find—the origin of the fog-thing that had wiped out three villages.

The stone-fall on the slope outside the crevice had not been delved from outside. It had been pushed out from within by something very powerful. And there were still marks in the crushed gravel made by the thing's feet.

Tag rolled tight balls of grass around the ends of sticks, wrapped them with burr-vines, and wove them tight. The resulting bundle of torches—which some dwarves called Theiwar lamps—would give no great light, but each small flame would last for a while. With his first light ignited, Tag drew his blade and entered the dark hole.

The tall, narrow tunnel wound its way into the cliff, turning here and there where scour and erosion had opened faults, but generally going westward and down, deeper and deeper into the stone, hundreds of feet below the mesa. Along most of its length the crevice was no more than a sequence of natural, downward erosion channels, rarely more than a few yards wide, but often so tall that Tag could not see the ceiling. In some places the channels plunged away into dark nothingness both above and below, forcing him to find precarious paths across blind abysses—or to make his own paths. Only where the natural openings were very narrow did he find evidence that something had passed this way. In several such places, stone had been broken away to make the opening broad enough to accommodate something that was at least ten feet wide. In one such place he paused to taste the raw stone of the expanded

opening. It was freshly exposed, not more than a month or two at most.

It was slow going, but Tag kept at it. His Theiwar ancestors had been cliff-dwellers who lived in the natural caverns high on sheer mountainsides, and negotiating perilous crevices was as natural to him as working mine shafts to a Daergar, or delving to a Daewar.

By the time the tunnel changed, he could only guess at where he was, but he knew he was at least half a mile into the stone, and many hundreds of feet below its surface.

He barely glimpsed the change in the tunnel before his most recent torch flickered out, and he had to kindle another. But when he had light again, his eyes widened. The erosion channels ended abruptly at a wall of far harder stone, and in this wall was a perfectly round opening, and beyond the opening a perfectly round tunnel angling upward. He estimated the hole to be fifteen feet across.

Stepping into it, he found an obstacle—an ancient, eroded plug of stone that had worn away with the passing of time and fallen inward. It lay now in two pieces, split down the middle, and the break tasted fresh. Whatever had come through here had been blocked by the fallen “gate” and had broken it and gone over it.

Although the break was fresh, the surfaces of the gate were immensely old—as old, Tag guessed, as the mountains themselves. The sides of the tunnel were equally old, though exquisitely delved. They were perfectly smooth, without so much as a tool mark anywhere to indicate how such a thing had been created. The only flaw in the tunnel was a ragged trough running along the bottom of it, crusted with limestone. Water had run here in the past—slowly, but for a very long time. Tag looked around at the mystery and shuddered. It was as though the gods themselves might have made this tunnel, long before there was anybody else around to do it.

Fascinated, he went on, climbing steadily as he followed the strange hole. Upward and onward, the tunnel was as straight as a drawn cable. A quarter mile, then another quarter mile, and suddenly he was at its end. Here another stone gate had eroded and

fallen, had lain for untold centuries, then had been smashed aside by something very large and very strong.

Beyond the crushed gate was a large vaulted area, a sphere of glistening, shaped stone except for its floor, where limestone had crusted over the granite, filling a fourth of the cavern. Near its center, the floor had been broken away. Odd bits of broken limestone were scattered about, encircling a jagged ridge of broken stone like a small volcanic ring.

Tag approached, held his torch high, looked into the core, and whistled. This was where the thing had come from. Within the limestone was a perfect imprint of a great, curled body. He could see the clear impression of a huge, taloned foot. Part of the deep concavity where a big haunch had lain blended into the larger concavity where its body had been molded in limestone. Its head—he could see few details, except that its jaws were very large and contained a lot of sharp teeth—had been nestled on one forearm or wing, and its long, sinuous tail had been curled around it.

“It slept here,” he told himself. “It slept here, and the stone grew around it. Then it woke up.”

For a while he searched, but there was nothing more to see. Whatever the thing was, it had been alone. The cavern was entirely empty, and the only way out was the way he had come. With his last two torches, Tag Salan retraced a mile or more of passages, finally emerging into the open air where he had started. The sun was over the escarpment. More than half the day had passed. He followed the wall northward to where Damon Omenborn had made his climb, and started up. He had noticed that the upper level of the cliff was sheer, smooth stone. Damon would have had to cut holds there. Tag could use the same holds.

Atop Sheercliff he found his Hylar friend—and much more. Damon was no longer alone. In addition to a dead wizard and two live ones, he had acquired a very pretty dwarven girl and what could only be a female kender. The small creature was the first to notice Tag’s approach. She stared, then ran to meet him.

“Goodness!” she said. “Another dwarf! But you missed all the fun. There is no more magic being done here right now. I’m Shill. Well,

actually I'm Shillitec Medina Quickfoot, but you can call me Shill. And I guess you're Tag. Damon said you'd be along directly. Are you looking for Damon? He's right over there with Willow—she's my dwarf—packing mirrors and things. He has already packed the wizards, see?"

She pointed, and Tag stared. Two men, one rather badly bruised, lay side by side, thoroughly bound hand and foot. Their mouths were covered with gags. A third man lay sprawled nearby, obviously dead.

At a pile of packs and bundles, Damon Omenborn glanced around, stood, and turned. The girl with him also straightened, glaring at the newcomer.

"Don't remove those people's gags," Damon warned. "They're magic-makers, and their mouths are their main problem." He came forward, looked Tag over, and asked, "What did you find?"

"I found its nest," the Theiwar said. "Or its bed. That thing was down there a long time before it woke up."

"Any others like it?"

"Only the one. Somebody had sealed it into a cave, long enough ago for a half-mile of mountain and several feet of limestone to grow around it. What's been going on here?"

"Wizardry," Damon snapped, his eyes narrowing. "Those three have been up here surveying, if you can believe that. They intended to occupy this plateau and build some kind of magic place on it. A tower of sorcery. But I've put an end to that. I invited them to leave, but they chose to fight. I wish you'd been here. I could have used a little help."

The dwarf girl had approached, and now she snapped, "You *had* help, in case you've forgotten! If it hadn't been for me, you'd be dead now."

"Sorry." Damon nodded. "Yes, I had help. Tag, this is Willow Summercloud. She's from Windhollow, and ..."

"I remember," Tag grinned, bowing slightly.

"... and she followed us when we came west."

"I brought her here," the kender girl chirped. "She had never ridden a bird before, but she has now. Cawe wanted someone to do

something about these wizards, so we went looking for a dwarf, and she was the first one we found. Do you two know that you both have scorched beards?"

"What do we do with the wizards?" Tag asked Damon.

"I don't really know, but we can't leave them here. They'd just start building towers again."

Tag drew his short sword. "No problem," he said. "I'll just cut their throats."

The wizard in the dirty robes looked as though he were about to faint, but the nearest wizard, a bearded man with buckskin breeches and a red strap, struggled and strained at his bonds, his muffled voice audible behind his gag.

"He wants to talk," the little kender said.

"Of course he does," Damon sneered. "He wants to say a spell."

The wizard shook his head urgently, trying again to speak. Damon squatted beside him. "You have something important to say?"

The man nodded.

"No spells?" Damon demanded.

The man shook his head earnestly.

Damon thought it over, then beckoned to Tag. "Remove his gag," he said. "But stay at his side, and if he says one word ... *one single word* ... that you don't understand, kill him."

With the gag removed, Megistal cleared his throat, then told Damon, "It won't do you any good to kill us. With Tantas dead, Sigamon and I cannot continue our project. It requires three."

"Then there will be no tower?" Damon asked.

"Oh, there will be a tower," the man said. "Others are following us. They'll finish the project, whether we're here or not."

"Like rust they will," Damon growled. "Thorbardin will see to that."

"You can't stop the Orders of High Sorcery," Megistal sighed.

"We can certainly try. And with all your survey stakes removed ..."

"It makes no difference now. We have completed the testing of the stones, and the Stone of Threes is planted at the center point. All that remains to lay the foundation perimeters for the tower is the

testing of mirrors. The others will find the Stone of Threes and complete the tests. Then building will begin, and nothing you or all the dwarves of this land can do will stop them.”

“Tell me where the Stone of Threes is,” Damon growled.

“No.” Megistal lowered his eyes. “Kill me if you will, but I won’t tell you that.”

The kender girl stood beside Damon. She reached into the pouch at her belt and withdrew a bauble. “Is this it?” she asked.

“Put that back!” the wizard gasped, his eyes bulging in disbelief. “That isn’t yours, you little ... purloiner!”

Abruptly, Tag’s blade went across the wizard’s exposed throat, and Damon had to grab quickly to stop the cut. “Wait!” he said. “What are you doing?”

“He said a word I don’t understand,” Tag explained, shrugging.

“It just means ‘thief,’ ” Damon growled. Turning, he grabbed the bauble from the kender’s hand and looked at it. It was an oval gemstone, a polished thing of many facets. Its color seemed to change constantly as he turned it in the sunlight, shifting from clear to milky white, to various shades of red, to gray, to inky black.

“I’d say, offhand, that this is the Stone of Threes,” the dwarf said. “What’s it for?”

“Put it back!” Megistal shouted. “You don’t know what you’re doing! There are only seven of those. One for each Tower of High Sorcery. Without it ... Without all seven towers, magic will never be properly balanced!”

“Tough,” Damon mused. Casually, he held the changing gem to the light, then tasted it with his tongue. His nose wrinkled in disgust. The thing didn’t taste like a normal, natural gem. It tasted terrible.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Megistal demanded.

“I’m putting you out of the tower business.” Damon stood, put the gem into his own belt pouch, and sealed the flap.

“Hey!” the kender chirped, “that’s mine! I found it!”

“Do we kill them now?” Tag asked Damon, replacing the wizard’s gag.

“No.” Damon hesitated. “We probably should, but ... no. Maybe they will spread the word that wizards don’t belong here.”

“What are we going to do with them?”

“Leave them,” Damon urged. “By the time they get loose, we’ll be well away from here.” He turned to Megistal. “Be grateful for your life, human,” he said. “Just remember, you have been ordered out of Kal-Thax. I suggest you leave as soon as you can move.”

* * * * *

While the leaders of the thanes of Thorbardin—meeting in extraordinary session on a cleared stone shelf above the Daebardin docks—got down to the business of hearing the reports of Gran Stonemill and Mace Hammerstand, Quill Runebrand wandered around the area like a small, dark cloud. Head down and hands clasped behind him, he stalked here and there muttering to himself, sometimes causing people to dodge aside to keep from being bumped into.

Deep in concentration, he tried to assemble his thoughts in practical, logical order, as any good dwarf might do when something is bothering him. But it seemed to do no good. Oh, there were things bothering Quill, all right. He wasn’t happy about the informal meeting of the council. Quill loved pomp and ceremony, and the chieftains had just dispensed with all of that and gone straight to business.

The business of the killing thing that had launched itself upon Kal-Thax worried him, too. It was frightening and unsettling that there could be such a creature, right here in the mountains of the dwarven clans. What was it? Where did it come from? Were there others like it out there somewhere? And what was Damon Omenborn thinking of to go off on some wild mission to search for such a thing’s nest? Damon Omenborn was to be the “father of kings,” if there was anything to the old stories about his birth. Now he was out there in the wild, somewhere, almost as though he were inviting his own doom.

It was Mistral Thrax who had told Quill Runebrand that Damon was destined to be the father of kings. Mistral Thrax had heard it

himself from the apparition of Kitlin Fishtaker, who was legendary. Mistral Thrax had believed it, and Quill Runebrand wanted it to be true—though he couldn't bring himself to really wish kings on his people.

But if Damon went out tearing around the wilderness lands and got himself killed, then none of it could ever come to be.

Quill stalked, muttered to himself, and worried.

There was the problem of the human wizards who had disappeared from the Road of Passage—first three of them and now, if those people on the Ergothian border could be believed, maybe a hundred or so more. What were humans doing in Kal-Thax? What were they after? And even more terrible, these were magic-users. That was as frightening to the dwarf as it was revolting.

And Gran Stonemill's concern about the old Daewar tunnel that led through Sky's End Mountain—that also was a great worry. Was the tunnel truly sealed? Was it proof against magic-users? And if not, could it be made so? Quill Runebrand knew little about magic, but his intuition told him that anything that had been closed could be opened.

The only way for the old tunnel to be safe, he felt, would be for there to be no tunnel at all. If it were somehow obliterated, instinct told him, then even magic couldn't unobliterate it.

Wandering the ways of the Daebardin waterfront, Quill fumed and fretted. Something was nagging at him, some hunch or intuition that seemed just beyond his grasp. He couldn't tell which of his many worries it was.

Could it be the fact that Northgate, though almost completed, was still an open portal? Or the fact that nothing had been heard from Cale Greeneye's search party since they set out to track the fogbound creature?

Could it be something he had eaten?

He searched his mind for all of the many things he might find to worry about, seeking clues as to which one had suddenly raised itself in his thoughts from worry to innate dread. Mistral Thrax had always been an intuitive dwarf, often seeming to know a bit more about things than he rightly could know. It came, he had said, of

having been exposed once to magic. He had recovered from the magic, he said, but some of its echoes lingered on.

And maybe some of those echoes had passed on to Quill Runebrand.

There was the question that had become foremost among the chieftains, almost from the moment Barek Stone expressed it. The point that, in emergency, Thorbardin could have only one leader. As the captain general of forces stated it, the point was obvious and inarguable. But to Quill, as to most dwarves of Thorbardin, the idea of everybody being led by one person was a frightful thought. And worse yet, it bordered on the heretical.

Only once had anyone ever tried to be king of all the dwarves. That was the maniac Glome, ninety years ago. Glome had died for his efforts, but the episode had solidified one thing that all the dwarves could agree about. They didn't want to have a king.

And nobody wanted to *be* a king, either. No sane dwarf, in Quill's opinion, would ever seek such a job. But in case of real emergency, one must lead.

Quill scratched his beard, shook his head, and started to pace again, then looked up, and his eyes widened. He was standing at the lakeshore—the subterranean lake that was named Urkhan Sea—and as he raised his eyes some trick of light drew his gaze to the mighty stalactite descending into midlake from the shadows of the great cavern above. The stalactite was the largest natural construct of living stone that anyone had ever seen. It was probably the largest stalactite in the world. It was called the Life Tree, and within it was the rising city of Hybardin, home of Thane Hylar.

Sun-tunnels above Daebardin lighted the shoreline brightly, but out in the center of the lake there was a gloominess as though clouds were forming around the Life Tree—dark clouds that spread in all directions to obscure the distant, vaulted ceilings of Thorbardin.

Quill blinked and rubbed his eyes. A trick of the light, he told himself. But it was still there, and now a ghostly figure seemed to appear in the clouds. Huge, wavering, and barely visible, it might have been a faint mirage, but Quill stared at it in openmouthed awe.

It was the vague outline of a dwarf, and it seemed to shift from one contour to another. One minute it appeared to be an old dwarf leaning on a crutch—the way Mistral Thrax had leaned on his crutch sometimes—and the next moment it was slightly different, like a tattered dwarf beset by scars and pain, holding in his hand a fishing spear.

Quill stared, gulped, and looked around to see if anyone else had noticed the phenomenon. But none had, it seemed. People came and went around him, hurrying this way and that as people always did, but even those who glanced toward the lake in passing seemed to notice nothing odd. Yet when Quill turned back, the shifting cloud-image was still there for his eyes. Now voices spoke in his mind, voices that whispered in unison.

“What one fears is not the teeth of a dragon, nor the tail nor the talons of a dragon,” the voices whispered. “What one fears when the mind envisions dragons is the whole dragon.”

“What?” Quill asked aloud. Around him, several dwarves glanced his way, raised curious brows, then went on.

“It is not this scroll or that scroll that contains wisdom,” the voices whispered in his head. “Wisdom is not in any scroll ... but it is in all scrolls.”

Quill frowned, flapped his arms, and shouted. “What in the name of Reorx does *that* mean?” Around him people stopped, stared at him, then hurried away, hoping whatever afflicted the lorekeeper was not contagious.

The cloud-vision shifted, from crutch-leaner to spear-holder and back. “A spoke is not a wheel,” the mind-voices whispered. “A point is not an arrow, nor is grain bread. Knowledge is not wisdom, Quill Runebrand, nor is the part the puzzle.”

“Is that supposed to make sense?” Quill shrieked. “What does it mean?” Members of a guard company passing nearby looked at one another and shook their heads. The keeper of scrolls was becoming stranger by the day.

The mind-voices were silent for a moment, the vision shifting and swaying. Then a single voice, a voice halting and oddly inflected,

whispered to him, "Your concerns are well founded, Quill Runebrand. Thorbardin is in peril. Beware."

Before he could react, the voice changed to another voice, and Quill gasped. "What did I teach you?" the voice of Mistral Thrax hissed in his mind. "What was the first, fundamental thing I tried to get through your thick skull?"

Then as quickly as it had appeared, or seemed to appear, the vision was gone, though the impression of dark clouds over Thorbardin remained. Maybe the lorekeeper had seen a vision, and maybe he only imagined it, but suddenly the vague dreads in his mind became sure knowledge. He turned away, his face as pale as winter ice.

The fundamental thing! Wisdom is not *a* knowledge. Wisdom is *all* the knowledge one has, speaking in its own way, telling the mind things that are beyond knowing.

Intuition, Mistral Thrax had told him many years ago, is wisdom trying to get through the narrow places in the mind.

Quill knew now what had been bothering him. It was not just the mystery of the mages, not just the killing beast that stalked the mountains, not just the question of how to meet an emergency. It was all of those things combined.

Somehow they were all connected, somehow all interrelated, and they were the parts of the danger that Quill sensed.

Thorbardin was in peril, and the dark clouds he sensed were an omen!

A time of storms was at hand.

"Barek Stone was right!" Quill announced to no one in particular, as startled passers-by turned to stare at him. "The mages will come to Thorbardin, and we will have to fight them! And the beast of the fog is out there because of the mages!"

Scattering bystanders in all directions, Quill Runebrand ran as fast as his quick, short legs could pump, heading for the pavilion where the chieftains of the thanes were just facing the question of how to meet an emergency that could threaten the entire fortress and the realm it protected.

As he approached, Quill was shouting, "Listen to me! Listen! We don't need a king, but we do need a ... a ... Oh, rust, what's a good word? A ... an executive! A council can rule, but one must order!"

In the pavilion, puzzled faces turned toward him.

"What the blazes is the scrollmaster jabbering about?" Olim Goldbuckle snapped, turning to Willen Ironmaul. "He's Hylar, Willen. Does he make sense to you?"

For a moment, Willen Ironmaul didn't answer. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Yes, he makes sense. And, by Reorx, he's right!" Willen stood and raised his hands for silence. "I propose a regency," he said when he had their attention. "We all agree, Thorbardin needs no king. But we must have one who can direct all when necessary. A regent could have full authority to lead and command, and still not be a king. He'd just be a chief of chiefs."

They thought it over, and Slide Tolec asked, "On what would such authority be based?"

"On the approval of the council," Willen said. "Approval given in advance, for certain actions under certain conditions."

"The problem remains, though," Vog Ironface rumbled. "There may be a day when Daergar will follow Theiwar, or Theiwar follow Daewar, but that day has not come yet. Why would a Daergar follow one who is not Daergar, or a Theiwar one not Theiwar?"

"Because they follow their own chieftains," Willen said. "And a regent would speak not just for the council, but for each chieftain among us."

"Klar followed Hylar once," Pakka Trune observed. "We did not regret that. Would Willen Ironmaul be regent?"

"I have no wish to be regent." The Hylar shook his head. "Olim Goldbuckle is senior here. Let him be regent."

"Not me!" Goldbuckle snorted. "The rest of you are chieftains. I am prince of my people. Were I to become regent, as sorry as I am to admit it, the Daewar might become truly insufferable."

"They already are," a Theiwar on the sidelines muttered.

"Don't look at me." Slide Tolec pushed back from the table as glances turned his way. "I'm no regent. I never even wanted to be chieftain of the Theiwar."

Vog Ironface removed his iron mask, his grizzled fox-face wrinkling in a squinting frown. "I refuse to be considered," he rumbled. "I am Daergar. I will never be less ... or more."

"Well, we're not leaving this table until *somebody* is regent," Olim Goldbuckle snorted.

"Reorx," Quill Runebrand muttered. "And I thought I had a good idea."



9

The Shaft of Reorx

When Willen Ironmaul of the Hylar—much against his better judgment—was made regent of Thorbardin, it was by vote of five to one. His was the only opposing vote. It was Olim Goldbuckle’s argument that clinched the decision of the chieftains. Having once been Calnar, the Daewar prince pointed out, the Hylar had the cultural experience of operating and defending a great dwarven stronghold. Thoradin had been their home. Second, he argued, it had been the Hylar who brought the other thanes together under the Covenant of the Forge, and it might be assumed that the people who created a bond were the best equipped to maintain that bond. And, finally, the wily Daewar pointed out—his eyes twinkling as he sealed the Hylar’s fate—the Hylar was the onlythane in Thorbardin that other thanes did not have ancient reasons to hate. The Hylar hadn’t been in these mountains long enough to have collected grudges. Therefore, he proclaimed, the only logical choice for regent of Thorbardin was Willen Ironmaul.

All things considered, Willen took the outcome of the vote fairly graciously. He stormed around for a few minutes, accusing his fellow chieftains of everything from treachery to complicity, then resumed his seat and pounded the table with a heavy fist. “If I am to be regent,” he thundered, glaring at one and then another of the chiefs, “I shall begin with some proclamations.”

His first proclamation was that any dwarf who approached or addressed him in the way one might normally approach or address a ruler had better be ready to meet him in the pits. He would no more tolerate the trappings of royalty than would any other sane dwarf.

His second proclamation was that completion of Northgate was the highest priority task within Thorbardin and should be accomplished as quickly as was dwarvenly possible.

His third order was that the old Daewar tunnel—the original route of exploration into the undermountain realm—should be thoroughly inspected, its seals reinforced, and that, if possible, the external end of it—fifty miles north of the first warren on the northeast slope of Sky’s End Peak—should be not only sealed but obliterated for all time. To dwarven logic, the only truly impenetrable tunnel was no tunnel at all.

“That tunnel took a decade to delve,” Olim Goldbuckle said. “How do you propose to obliterate it in less time?”

“I give your best delvers one week to find an answer to that question.” Willen glared at the Daewar. “If they have not done so in that time, then, by Reorx, I’ll come up with an answer myself!”

The new regent turned to the other chieftains, his gaze thoughtful and serious. “I believe, from the reports we have, that Thorbardin will face grave threats very soon. I want an inventory of every means and mechanism we have for defense.”

“You already have that,” Slide Tolec pointed out. “We have garrison troops, we have the guards, and the Roving Guard....”

“Yes, I know.” Willen nodded. “And we have the gates—one of them, anyway—and Anvil’s Echo behind each gate. We have murder holes and guard stations. All of these are for the purpose of defense. What I want is an inventory of what else we have that could be used as weapons if necessary. In Thoradin, our people had a saying: ‘When there are enemies, look to the left sides of your tools.’ It means that every tool can serve as a weapon, if the one wielding it knows how to use it so.

“I also want the garrisons doubled. Set drum and flare stations at every mile of every cavern, warren, and way, so that we don’t have to wait on runners and flash-signals in case of emergency. I want daily drills of all fighting units and a reserve unit ready to back each regular unit.”

Barek Stone, captain general of forces, smiled his cold smile at that. Willen Ironmaul was talking his language.

“We made a wise choice, Olim,” Slide Tolec whispered to the prince of the Daewar. “This one takes charge when he has to, and he knows how to think like a warrior.”

Olim nodded vaguely and returned to his own frowning thoughts. How was anyone, he wondered, going to simply *obliterate* a tunnel that had taken the finest Daewar delvers ten years to create?

* * * * *

By the time Megistal had freed himself of his bonds and begun untying Sigamon, they were alone on the plateau above Sheercliff. The dwarves—the one called Damon and his companion, and the female who had joined them—were long gone. They had gone down the face of Sheercliff and into the rough breaks to the east. Had Megistal been able to cast a trace spell while they were still within sight, he would now know where they were. But with his hands bound and his mouth stifled, he had been unable to use ordinary magic. As for the kender female, she had just wandered off somewhere.

Now Sigamon sat up, pulled the gag from his mouth, and whimpered, rubbing his wrists. “That dwarf nearly killed me,” he whined. “Why didn’t you destroy him?”

“I came closer to that than you did.” Megistal turned away. “Fascinating,” he muttered to himself. “That dwarf could truly resist magic. He struggled against it and survived. I would never have thought that anyone could do that.”

“Stubborn,” Sigamon hissed. “Proud and stubborn and ... and just plain selfish!”

“Selfish?” Megistal glanced at him.

“Of course, selfish! Magic is important! The channeling of magics—through the towers—is vital. Yet these dwarves have the effrontery to put their own interests ahead of the common good.”

“Oh.” Megistal shrugged. “Well, there is no need to worry about a Tower of High Sorcery here anymore. Without the Stone of Threes planted beneath its center, a tower would not respond to its occupants or know how to protect itself. It would be just another

building. The Stone of Threes is the source of a tower's life. And now the Stone of Threes is gone."

"Then we'll just have to get it back," Sigamon snapped. "Where did they go with it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Megistal said. He turned away again, talking mostly to himself. "Is that dwarf exceptional, or are they all resistant? And just how resistant are they? I would like to make a study of those dwarves...."

"Study!" Sigamon scoffed. "You study, then, red-strap! I have better things to do." Standing erect on long, awkward legs, the white-robe crossed his arms in front of himself, lowered his head, and chanted, "*Degat tonin ot ...*" He hesitated, taking a deep breath. "I hate this spell," he whined. "It always makes me nauseous. *Degat tonin ot tonosos! Chapak!*"

Where he stood, the air shimmered, and abruptly he was gone. Megistal shook his head. To resort to a transport spell, the wizard must have been truly upset, because, wherever he was now, he was certainly upset as a result of it. Transport spells were hard on the strongest of stomachs, and Sigamon's was not very strong.

Muttering to himself, Megistal gathered up a few supplies, put them into a pack, and stepped to the edge of the cliff. He paused, noticing movement in the distance, and conjured a viewing ring. When the image was clear, he frowned. It wasn't the dwarves. There was no sign of them. The image in the view-ring was only a man—a plains barbarian of some kind, riding a horse.

But it occurred to the wizard that a horse might be a useful thing. Traveling by horse was faster than traveling by foot and was far more pleasant than a transport spell. Casually, the wizard pointed a finger at the image in the ring and muttered an incantation. Both the horse and the man seemed to freeze where they were and remained motionless. Megistal hoisted his pack and stepped off the edge of the cliff. With simple levitation he lowered himself to the ground below and set off eastward, toward where his horse awaited him.

Let Sigamon and those who followed worry about the Stone of Threes and the building of towers, he decided. A hundred and

twenty wizards—a hundred and twenty-one, counting Sigamon—would certainly be enough to find the stone, recover it from the dwarves, and get on with the project. Megistal had found something more interesting to think about. He wanted to take a better look at this land of dwarves and at the people in it. He had come out from the first tower to take up higher studies of the magical arts. He believed—everyone he knew believed—that no sentient creature could resist the powers of magic without using magic to do so. Yet now, a simple dwarf had done just that.

When Megistal came to the place where the motionless rider sat on his motionless horse, the wizard waved his hand and muttered. The man was lifted from his saddle and dropped unceremoniously onto the stony ground. Megistal stepped up beside the animal, swung into its saddle, and released his freeze spell. Instantly, the horse took a step forward, then half-turned, looking around in confusion. Megistal gripped its reins and turned it, heading east. Behind him the fallen man scrambled to his feet, shouted, “Horse thief!” and set an arrow in his bow.

Megistal muttered, “*Deme tosis.*” The arrow humming toward him turned as though deflected by a shield and disappeared into high brush.

Megistal turned in the saddle. “Go away!” he shouted at the man running toward him. He mouthed another spell, and a tall tree appeared directly in the man’s path. The man ran into it and bounced off, sprawling on his back. The tree faded, and Megistal put heels to his mount. As the horse surged into a ground-eating run, Megistal told himself, “Well, magic worked just fine on him.”

Behind him, Quist Redfeather got to his feet, wiping blood from his face. Eyes as cold and angry as winter clouds looked after the receding mage. “A wizard,” the Cobar growled. “A horse-stealing wizard.”

Brushing himself off, he assembled his fallen weapons and turned to look westward—the direction he had been going. Then, with a fierce growl, he turned eastward again. His credentials from Xak Tsaroth were hidden between the leathers of the saddle on which the wizard now rode. Without them, he could not complete the

mission the High Overlord had sent him on. Unless he could recover the little linen scroll with its seal, stamp, and marque of passage, there was no sense in going on.

Besides, Quist Redfeather was a horseman. He was a *Cobar* horseman. And the one insult that no Cobar could tolerate was for someone to steal his horse.

“Wizard or not,” he told himself, “that red-strapped thief is going to wish he had never seen me.”

He would never be able to catch the mage on foot, he knew. But the place where he had found the horse was not far away, and where that horse came from were two more. In all his years in the wild lands, Quist Redfeather had never encountered anyone or anything that he could not track, trail, and overtake with a good horse under him.

* * * * *

Inside Southgate, beyond Anvil’s Echo, the magma pit called the Shaft of Reorx was the center of intense, bustling activity—as it had been since the day of its first stoking several years before.

Here the delving dwarves, following plans laid out by the Hylar, had dug the deepest hole in all of Thorbardin. From the lowest floor of Gateway Hall, in the center of a wide concourse set with great foundries and hundreds of metalsmith shops, trade stalls, and manufactories of a hundred kinds, the shaft descended almost five thousand feet straight down, a circular hole thirty feet across at its top and ringed, eight hundred feet below the top, by a series of shaft caverns that housed immense smelters. At the bottom of the shaft, nearly a mile down, bright magma roiled and bubbled. It was not the natural magma that had been discovered beneath old Thorin, but dwarf-made magma, one of the greatest accomplishments of dwarven engineering in a hundred years. In building the shaft, the dwarves of Thorbardin had delved until they came to a stratum of stone that, once kindled and melted by intense heat, would sustain itself as magma for long periods.

The proper stone had been found halfway down. They knew by the taste of the stone, the taste of latent fires. It was not magma, but

it could be made into magma—unlike the unsuccessful Shame of Reorx within Northgate, where no such strata were found. Carefully, and with great craft, the pit was ignited over a period of three years by focusing sunlight directly from the sun-tunnels above the great hall of audience, through a series of Hylar-crafted lenses. The largest of these lenses, an enormous glass convexity called the Temple of Stars because of the way it imaged the nighttime sky, was directly above the shaft.

Reignition once a year was adequate to keep the magma at the bottom of the shaft alive.

In a way, the Shaft of Reorx was the heart of Thorbardin. It powered all of the great smelters that converted ore—from the Daergar mines and from trade with the human orders of Ergoth—into the raw metals from which the goods of Thorbardin were made. In addition, the Shaft of Reorx was tapped by countless small tunnels and ducts to carry warm air throughout the underground realm. Every city in Thorbardin had a heat exchange, and all of them but one were fed from the Shaft of Reorx. Only the Hylar domain, Hybardin, standing above the center of the Urkhan Sea, could not be heated by the shaft. A main duct had been started, then stopped and sealed when the delvers discovered that its route was perilously close to the bottom of the Urkhan Sea. The Hylar heat exchange now was based on direct radiation through sun-tunnels in the peaks of Cloudseeker, mirror-concentrated on the Life Tree's main reservoirs.

A side effect of this, which some considered a blessing and others a nuisance, was in the Hybardin tap system. Every city in Thorbardin now had a channeled water system managed by tapwardens under the direction of Talc Bendiron, the general tapwarden of Thorbardin. Intricate labyrinths of aqueducts, reservoirs, troughs, and drilled shafts made clean water available to every part of every city. But, in Hybardin, the water at the taps was always hot water.

Other Thorbardin dwarves had to heat their water to bathe. The Hylar had to cool their water to drink.

In addition to firing the smelters and warming the lodgings of Thorbardin, the Shaft of Reorx also powered the lift stages of the main vertical transport shafts. There were lift stages everywhere in Thorbardin, but most of them were hand-powered, using pulleys and winches. Each lift stage was a continuous belt of layered cable running between great pulleys in a closed shaft, with an open gate at each level of the city it served. Stages like flat shelves were attached to the belts at eight-foot intervals, and each stage could hold as many as nine dwarves or one ore cart. When the lifts were in operation, a person desiring to go from one level to another had simply to step aboard a passing stage, then step off when it passed the level he wanted.

The main transport shafts, though, were far too large for hand-winches. These were powered by steam, generated in water vats at the bottom of each shaft with heat ducted from the Shaft of Reorx and trapped beneath spring-release valves. The resulting action, to anyone but dwarves, would have seemed terrifying. At each gate of each lift—lifts three times the size of the ordinary stages—a metal floor would appear from below and rattle to a halt as the great coil springs in the depths forced the valves closed. For about a minute and a half, the big stage would remain in place, while those aboard it got off and those waiting got on, then as the steam beneath the valves reached critical peak, a whistle shrilled, the gate crashed shut, and the stage roared upward at great speed, to stop abruptly at the next level.

The downward stages, appearing at gates opposite the upward gates, were simply the other side of the up-lifts, on the downward course of the great cable-belt.

To the dwarves, it was an enormously logical and practical system for moving large groups or large objects from level to level. The fact that the crashing, roaring abruptness of the steam-fed lifts would be deadly to anyone just stepping on or off when the valves released was of little concern. The practical-natured dwarves simply did not step on or off after the whistle sounded.

With all of its uses, the Shaft of Reorx was, in most people's opinion, the finest tool in Thorbardin. Yet now, when Willen

Ironmaul's order went out, to look to the left side of all the tools, it presented an enigma. Talc Bendiron, the tapwarden, was the first of the wardens to arrive beneath the Temple of Stars to study the matter and was pacing around the great hole, pausing now and then to lean precariously over its railing, when Cambit Steelsheath, warden of ways, came to join him. Within minutes they were both pacing, gaping, and scratching their heads. Bell Brightluster, warden of trade, and Gem Bluesleeve, warden of the watch, joined them there, and even Bardion Ledge—who as wastewarden had nothing to do with the great shaft—came to observe.

The regent demanded that every tool in Thorbardin have an alternate use—in emergency—as a weapon of defense. Yet the Shaft of Reorx, the greatest tool of all, offered no such use that they could think of. As one, the senior wardens of Thorbardin paced, peered, and pondered. Crouch Firesear, clerk of the council of wardens, followed after them with cove and slate. After a time Pelt Bezel, keeper of forges, and Smoke Lodestone, master of mines, joined them.

“The Hylar's theory is just fine,” the Daergar overseer rumbled behind his slitted mask. “Anything that can serve as a tool should be able to serve as a weapon. But this? I don't see how.”

“I don't, either,” Bardion Ledge conceded. “It's a hole. Granted, it is almost a mile deep and has live magma at its bottom, but still it is only a hole.”

“It is a tool, though,” Pelt Bezel insisted. “It heats the smelters, drives the transport shafts, and feeds the heat exchanges. What is that, if not a tool?”

“Tool, yes,” Cambit Steelsheath agreed, “but it's still just a hole. How can a hole be used as a weapon?”

“Very effectively,” Bardion Ledge said, grinning, “if we can persuade our enemies to jump into it. But I don't see that as a practical plan for general contingencies.”

A crowd had grown at the rail of the pit, but now those on the outside turned and backed away as a reeking odor reached their noses.

“'Scuse us,” a high-pitched voice requested.

The wardens turned and stared. Just behind them, twenty or more Aghar—the dim, coarse little people usually called gully dwarves—approached the rail. It was not so much a group as a sprawl of gully dwarves, tripping over one another, tumbling here and there but still managing to carry among them—more or less upright—a large, battered copper barrel, open at the top and reeking of stench.

The one in the lead, a ragged and disheveled little gray-beard named Blemish, was the Grand Notioner of the Aghar clan of Bulp. “ ’Scuse us,” he said again, more urgently. “Stand ’side, please.”

As the wardens stepped aside, the gully dwarves carried their noisome vessel to the rail and emptied it into the Shaft of Reorx, almost losing the barrel itself in the process.

“Here, now!” Talc Bendiron snorted. “What are you doing? What is that?”

The little Grand Notioner looked around at him. “Huh?”

“What is that you dumped into the shaft?”

“Highbulp say clean th’ sewer tank.” Blemish shrugged. “That stuff from th’ tank.”

“Why did you dump it into the Shaft of Reorx?”

Blemish shrugged again, staring up at the much larger full dwarves around him. “Gotta ...” He gulped and tried again. “Gotta put it someplace.”

“Not in the Shaft of Reorx!” Talc Bendiron roared. “Sewer waste goes to the waste process pits! You Aghar have a waste pit. Why didn’t you put it there?”

“Not usin’ pit for stuff like this anymore,” the little Grand Notioner explained. “Too good a place for rat huntin’ to mess it up with sewer stuff.”

“Reorx!” Talc Bendiron shook his head. “I thought I’d seen everything. But this ...!”

Far below, the sludge from the Aghar sewers, falling toward the magma, began to vaporize in the heat of the pit. A distant roar echoed up the great shaft, and a small cloud of rancid steam wafted upward.

“So that’s what’s been happening to our heat ducts,” Cambit Steelsheath muttered. “Gris Bolen thought there was rot in the

system somewhere.”

“I’m going to put a stop to this!” Bardion Ledge growled. Glaring at Blemish, he demanded, “Where is your chieftain?”

“Who?”

“Your leader! The Highbulp! What’s-his-name!”

“Oh, him.” Blemish shrugged. “Name’s Just th’ First. Dunno where he is, though. Highbulp gets lost a lot.”

Gem Bluesleeve had returned to the rail around the Shaft of Reorx and was looking over it thoughtfully. He had the glimmerings of an idea about how the shaft might be used as a weapon of defense. But before voicing it, he decided to talk it over with Willen Ironmaul first.



10

The Gathering Storm

In a secluded cove west of the Thunder Peaks, as the moons of Krynn rose above the plains of Ergoth to the east, wizards gathered. The white moon appeared first, frosty and bright above an ebony horizon, and a long line of tall figures emerged from the shadows of a walled gorge. Single file, they came down the rocky slopes and gathered in the little cove, each in turn pausing to face east, toward the risen moon, and speak soft words of respect. They were all human and all men, though a motley and ill-assembled group. Some wore robes, some kilts and capes. Some wore boots and some sandals. Some had hats of various kinds, but many were bareheaded. Some were shaven and some bearded, some sturdy and some gaunt, some were men in their middle years and some seemed much older. Some carried staves, some simple sticks, but most carried no tools or weapons of any kind.

The only feature predominant among them was that many, if not most, had at least one article of clothing which was white in color. Though the Orders of High Sorcery were yet very new, it was already becoming the practice of many among them to dress symbolically, each in the color of the moon that ruled his particular school of sorcery.

Forty wizards came with the rising of the white moon, and one awaited them there. When all the newcomers had completed their gestures of respect for the risen moon, they turned toward the one who had summoned them. "Sigamon," one said. "It was you who sent the call spell?"

"I sent it, Porcirin." Sigamon nodded, his nose wrinkling in distaste. He had never cared for the officious, high-handed manner

of the mage from the eastern city of Istar who called himself Porcirin the Pure. Given half a chance in any situation, Porcirin would try to take charge. And when he did take charge, in Sigamon's opinion, he usually led in the wrong direction.

"I hope you had a good reason," Porcirin snapped. "We have come many miles out of our way to respond."

"Why aren't you at the place of the tower?" someone else asked. "It was your task—you and those others—to complete the testing of stones and mirrors and await us there."

"The tower is in jeopardy," Sigamon said. "The Stone of Threes has been stolen."

"Stolen?" Faces in the crowd turned to look at one another, incredulous. "How could it have been stolen?" someone demanded. "Who took it?"

"Wait for the rest," Sigamon said. "I'll tell the tale once, when all are here."

They waited, some sitting on the cold ground, others pacing impatiently. In the east, the white moon Solinari crept up the dark sky. Then below it and northward, stars just at the horizon seemed to disappear—and others above them, a circle of darkness in the starfield. In the cove, a wizard pointed. "Nuitari," he said.

Seeming smaller than Solinari, but rising more rapidly, the dark moon crept above the horizon, and across the cove night shadows moved as people emerged from a high valley. Again, the group consisted of forty men, as varied as the first group in appearance but similar in that most of them wore dark clothing, and each had some item—a hat, a robe, a corselet, or wrapped leggings—of solid black.

These approached the group already there, and one stepped forward. He was a tall, slender man with a dark hat, dark cape, and cruel, cynical eyes. "Brothers," he said, bowing slightly.

Many of the white-wearers stared at him in surprise. "Kistilan," some of them muttered. "What's Kistilan doing here?"

"We have been summoned by a call," the dark one said. "We are here, and there had better be a good reason. I do not care to have my time wasted."

“Sigamon sent the call,” Porcirin the Pure explained, making a contemptuous gesture. “He says the Stone of Threes for the tower of the mountains is missing.”

“Missing?” the dark-hatted figure hissed. “Has he lost it, then?”

“He says it was stolen,” someone said.

The dark wizard Kistilan spun toward Sigamon. “How could such a thing be?” he demanded. “Who stole it?” He turned, then, looking around the cove. “Are you here alone, of the testers? Where is Tantas?”

“Dead,” Sigamon said coldly.

In the east, pale reddish light grew above the horizon, and the rim of red Lunitari appeared. Over a crest above the cove came another file of forty, many of them wearing bits of red in their clothing. When they approached the gathered mages one of them demanded, “Who here summoned us? We have walked many miles this day, and not in the proper direction.”

“You walked.” Sigamon stepped forward, glaring at the newcomers. “You should be pleased that you had the leisure to walk. I came by transport spell, and my stomach still aches and turns within me.”

The nearest red-cloaks peered at him, then one said, “Sigamon? What are you doing here? Why aren’t you at Sheercliff with Megistal and the hunchback? What has happened?”

“Megistal has gone off to study dwarves,” Sigamon sneered. “I neither know nor care where he is. The hunchback—Tantas—is dead, killed by a dwarf. And that dwarf has the Stone of Threes. Without it, our mission to these lands is useless.”

“A *dwarf*?” Voices arose in disbelief. “A dwarf killed Tantas? What magic did the creature use?”

“A hammer.” Sigamon shook his head. “He threw a hammer and killed Tantas. Then he mauled me brutally for no reason and left Megistal and me bound and gagged while he and his accomplices made off with the tower-stone.”

“A *dwarf*?” a dozen asked, in unison.

“What accomplices did this ... this dwarf have?” the black-cloak, Kistilan, asked, sneering. “Were they dragons? Or possibly an army

of rogue mages? Have you lost your powers as well as your reason, pale conjurer?"

Sigamon glared at his tormentor and raised a shaking hand. A spell was on his lips, but it went unsaid. He was no match for Kistilan, and he knew it.

"Enough!" a red-wearer shouted. "That's enough of that! Both of you! Fight later if you like, but first let us hear what has happened."

"Mind your tone," another whispered. "That is Kistilan. Don't you know him?"

"Kistilan?" the red-robe stared at the dark wizard, then lowered his eyes. "What is Kistilan doing here?" he whispered.

"Whatever he likes, as usual," another muttered.

For long moments, the cove was silent, then an aged red-wearer raised his hands in sign of truce. "You, Sigamon. You said Megistal had gone to study dwarves. Why?"

"He thinks they may be immune to magic," Sigamon said. "It's pure nonsense, of course, but ..."

"I am sorry Megistal has gone," Kistilan hissed. "He once swore to kill me, and I was looking forward to seeing him die trying. His magic certainly is not the equal of mine. But even with the puniest of magic—such as yours, Sigamon—I don't see how a common dwarf could have bested you."

"The creature was extraordinarily stubborn. Besides, he tricked us. He betrayed our kindness to him."

"I see. And who were the others with him?"

"Other dwarves," Sigamon said, lowering his eyes in embarrassment. "Two other dwarves and a kender."

"Unbelievable," someone muttered. "Could you not control these dwarves with your spells, Sigamon?"

"Of course I could! My mistake was in trying to be gentle. The dwarf betrayed my kindness."

"And Tantas?" Kistilan asked. "I can't imagine Tantas ever being hampered by kindness."

"The dwarf caught him off-guard."

"Megistal, then? Megistal is a very powerful wizard, or so it is said ... though I will one day show him what true power is."

“Megistal tried to use illusion. The dwarf refused to believe the illusion. I told you, the creature was extraordinarily stubborn.”

Disbelieving but worried, a hundred and twenty-one wizards gathered secretly in the hidden cove high in the mountains to hear the whole story and discuss what to do about it. Kistilan stood aside, his face hidden by shadows. Whatever the truth here was, he knew it was what he had been waiting for. Dwarves had interfered with the Orders of High Sorcery. If the Stone of Threes was taken, they must retrieve it, by whatever means were necessary. Only seven of the artifacts existed in the whole world, one for each of the seven Towers of High Sorcery the Scions had decreed.

Among the wizards were some who suspected where dwarves would take such a thing. “It is a fortress,” one said. “North of here, where three crags cap a mighty peak.”

“The mountain is called Cloudseeker,” offered another. “People in Ergoth speak of a fortress the dwarves have built there. No one knows much about it, except its name: Thorbardin.”

In the shadows, Kistilan smiled a cruel smile, thinking rapidly. The fortress of the dwarves ... It was what the High Overlord of Xak Tsaroth most coveted. “A fortress is nothing,” the dark mage said casually. “If that is where the Stone of Threes is, then someone must go and get it.”

“That’s reasonable,” the red-cloak Salanik agreed. “Sigamon, you and the other testers traveled through this land to reach Sheercliff. Have you seen the fortress of the dwarves?”

“I have not.” Sigamon shrugged. “The lands north of here are full of dwarves. We thought it best to go unseen, so we avoided contact.”

“Then we should have a look at the place, I think. I can image it if ...”

“You can’t image a thing unseen,” Sigamon protested. “Not even a follower of Lunitari can cast a blind vision.”

“... if,” Salanik continued, “we have a pair of eyes to see it.”

Among the crowd of wizards, feet shuffled, and eyes turned away. No one wanted the discomfort of magical transport. Then Kistilan stood. “The one who lost the stone is the one who should go and

look,” he proclaimed. With an evil smirk, the black-wearer half-turned, muttered a quick incantation, and spun back to point directly at Sigamon. “*Chapak!*” he snapped, completing the spell.

Sigamon’s eyes went wide, and his hands went up. “No!” he wailed. “No-o-o ...!” The wail trailed off into silence as Sigamon disappeared.

“As good a choice as any.” Salanik shrugged. “Stand back, everyone.” The wizards moved back, clearing a span of ground. “*Vit vistis, obis ot Sigamon,*” the red chanted, spreading his arms as light grew in the open space, a bubble of pale brilliance that became brighter and more solid, then cleared to show a dim, shadowy view—a vision of stony, moonlit ground as though seen from just above. On the ground were two sandaled feet, with gaunt, awkward legs rising above them to the charred hem of what might once have been a white robe. The scene bobbed and danced, and mages all around frowned. “Is that all he can see?” someone asked. “What is he doing?”

“He is retching.” Kistilan grinned. “The transport spell has turned his stomach.”

Impatiently, the hundred and twenty waited while the view through Sigamon’s eyes bobbed and swayed. Then the view shifted, rising, and in the vision bubble distances grew—rising slopes of a mighty mountain, shadow-bathed in the moonlight, climbing up and away to great heights. Atop its crest, silhouetted against the night sky, were three great, natural spires of stone from which mists swirled upward.

“Cloudseeker Mountain,” an Ergothian wizard explained. “The place of the dwarven fortress called Thorbardin.”

“I see no fortress,” another said impatiently. “I see only a mountain.”

That was all any of them saw. Just a mountain. High on its face was a walled ledge, backed by an oval of metal, but nothing that suggested a fortress.

“Maybe it’s on the other side,” the bubble-maker suggested. “Kistilan, can you ...?”

“Certainly.” Kistilan shrugged. “Though he won’t like it. The north side of that mountain must be fifty miles from where he is now.” The dark mage muttered a spell, and the scene in the bubble blurred, swam nauseatingly, then cleared.

Again they were looking at the ground, but this time closer, and Sigamon’s hands were in the view. The scene wobbled, then steadied as one of Sigamon’s fingers traced a message in the dust. *I hate you for this, Kistilan*, it said.

The view in the bubble changed as the nauseated wizard got to his feet and looked up at the north slopes of Cloudseeker. The scene swept this way and that, scanning the slopes, then stopped at a place high on the peak where torchlight had appeared on a ledge. The light revealed a large oval portal of some kind, with a wide, walled ledge before it. Tiny figures moved about, pausing here and there as though they were listening to something. And, distantly, the gathered wizards heard the sound of drums beating in the night.

“Drum-call,” an Ergothian said. “The dwarves signal with drums. Something has alarmed them.”

“Maybe they have seen Sigamon,” someone suggested. “The dwarves have lookouts everywhere around that mountain.”

“Not likely,” another said. “There is only moonlight, and Sigamon is in shadows, far below those ledges.”

“I have heard,” the Ergothian said, “that there is one tribe of dwarves—the Daergar—who are dark-seekers.”

The vision in the bubble shifted this way and that, as though it was turning rapidly, looking around.

“Ignore the dwarves, Sigamon!” someone snapped. “Look for the fortress!”

Obediently, the vision turned toward the mountain again. There were many lights there now, and files of torches elsewhere on the slopes. But nowhere was there anything that looked like a castle or battlement.

“Are you sure there is a fortress?” someone asked. “I see nothing.”

“Idiots!” Kistilan snapped. “We are looking at it. The mountain itself is the fortress. That opening up there is a gate like the one we

saw on the south side, but this one is ajar. Dwarves are delvers. Thorbardin is beneath the peak, not on it!”

“That opening?” Someone else pointed. “If that, and the one on the other side, are gates, then this ‘fortress’ must be enormous.”

Enormous, Kistilan thought, and valuable. He wondered if the reward offered by the High Overlord of Xak Tsaroth would equal the treasure that the one who held that fortress could demand.

In the bubble, torchlight lined the ledges and trails of the slopes. It looked as though hundreds and hundreds of dwarves were emerging from the mountain, hurrying downward toward the valley below.

“Well, if that is where the Stone of Threes has gone,” Salanik suggested, “let us send Sigamon in to retrieve it. He is already there.”

But then the view in the bubble swam rapidly, shifting as the one whose eyes beheld it turned to look behind him. A company of short, stocky creatures stood there, all armed with shields and various hand weapons. The nearest one stepped forward, gesturing angrily, and in the bubble it seemed he had no face—only a featureless mask of metal with a slit for his eyes.

Sigamon’s hand appeared in the view-bubble, extended toward the dwarves, the index finger pointing.

“Well, he can certainly deal with that bunch,” someone said.

From the finger came brilliant light, and a thick mist of ice flecks swirled around the dwarves, obscuring them.

“A freeze,” a white-wearer noted. “Sigamon is very adept at freezes.”

The swirling ice cleared, and where there had been dwarves, now were only nodules of solid ice.

“So much for that,” a black-wearer said casually. “Now send him inside to get our ...”

One of the ice nodules cracked and moved. Then another, and another. The ice cracked away, and from the chips crawled dwarves, writhing in agony, but beginning to get to their feet and retrieve weapons.

“They are still alive!” a wizard hissed in the crowd. “Has Sigamon lost his power?”

Again the finger pointed, and great stones seemed to rain from above, smashing down upon the crawling, writhing dwarves. In an instant, the entire group was buried beneath an avalanche of stone. Then, incredibly, the stones shifted, some of them beginning to fade from view, and the dwarves were still there. Many lay still on the hard ground, but some were moving, and as the wizards watched in fascination one of them got to his knees, then to his feet. He held an iron shield before him and a javelin in his free hand, and the dark slit of his mask seemed to blaze with hatred.

Sigamon’s pointing finger rose again, but this time the dwarf acted first. More quickly than seemed possible, he took a step forward, crouched, and flung the iron-tipped javelin. In the distant cove, wizards gasped and ducked as the missile hurtled—it seemed—directly toward each of them.

Then the bubble went dark and flickered out of existence. In the stunned silence of the cove, someone said, “They killed him! That dwarf killed Sigamon!”

“How can that be?” another quavered. “How could any of them still be alive? That ice-freeze was enough to kill anyone instantly. And then the rain of stones ...”

“Remember what he said,” a red-wearer muttered. “He said Megistal believed a dwarf could ... could *resist* magic, somehow. He said Megistal tried an illusion on a dwarf, and the dwarf refused to believe the illusion. Stubborn, he said.”

“Nonsense!” Salanik snapped. “No one can resist magic, except with magic.”

“To be on the safe side,” a wizard in the crowd suggested, “maybe we should all go to retrieve our talisman. I don’t understand what we have seen, but we should take no chances.”

Now Kistilan stepped forward to the center of the crowd. “I agree,” he said, “that what we have seen suggests caution. Besides, that mountain fortress will take great energies to bring down. Why should we so exert ourselves, if there is a better way?”

“And what better way is that?” Salanik asked.

“Plain force of arms,” the dark wizard said. “There is an army near Xak Tsaroth. Mercenaries, ready to fight. Let them deal with these dwarves for us.”

“Mercenaries fight for pay,” a white-kilted mage said. “What would you have us do about that?”

Kistilan glared at the man. “Stupid,” he muttered. He knelt, picked up a small stone, and held it before him. Suddenly the stone became a shiny coin. Kistilan swept a casual hand, and the ground all around him was littered with coins.

“I can handle mercenaries,” he said. “The rest of you, just follow me.”

* * * * *

The drums said the fog-killer had struck again, this time at the Neidar village of Highland, near the south end of the great valley called the Vale of Respite. The Neidar farmers had taken warning from the approaching fog, and most had fled their village ahead of the thing, but some had remained to fight. Those were now dead.

In Thorbardin, Cale Greeneye heard the report from Northgate and assembled the Neidar at his command. Willen Ironmaul conferred with Barek Stone, then assigned three garrison companies of the Roving Guard to accompany the Neidar. They would go north, around the west slopes of Cloudseeker, to track down and kill the beast of the mists.

The drums were speaking now to Mace Hammerstand, captain of the Roving Guard, who was out with two companies guarding the entrance to the old Daewar tunnel against the threat of wizards until it could be permanently obliterated.

If the creature had maintained its course, it was possible that Cale Greeneye’s forces and Mace Hammerstand’s companies could trap it between them, somewhere between the Vale of Respite and Sky’s End.

By moonlight the expedition assembled at Northgate, where crews worked rapidly to complete the mounting of the great gate. Armed and solemn, carrying torches, the dwarves streamed out from Northgate and headed down the series of slanted ledges leading

toward the shadowed valley below, where Neidar horse-keepers waited with saddled mounts for those who would ride.

Cale Greeneye was halfway to the pens when he saw, on the low slopes beyond the pastures, a flare of white light that seemed to grow from nothing. Only for an instant did he see it, then it was gone. But a moment later there was another flare, dimmer than the first, and by its light it appeared that great stones were raining from the clear sky, piling up on the ground as they fell. The light faded, and mutters of surprise and concern swept along the dwarven column. They had all seen something, but none of them knew what it was.

“Could it be the beast?” someone asked. “Can it have turned ... and come this far?”

“It is not the beast,” Cale assured those near him. “It does not move that fast. I have trailed it. Even if it turned, it is still north of Sky’s End.” Then, nearing the horse pens, the leaders of the column came upon a battered group of masked Daergar, carrying the body of a human. The foremost of the miners raised a hand, recognizing Cale Greeneye. He removed his dented mask; there was blood on his beard beneath it.

“Cale,” he said. “It is I, Jedden Two-vein.”

“I know you, Jedden,” Cale greeted him. “What has happened?”

“This man”—the Daergar pointed—“was a wizard. We found him on the slopes over there. I ordered him to go away, but he made spells against us. We lost seven of our company. Some were killed by ice, and some by falling stone ... or what seemed like falling stone, except that stones do not fall from an empty sky. But perhaps those who died didn’t think of that.”

By torchlight, Cale looked at the body of the wizard, then turned away. “Take him to Northgate,” he said. “But not inside. Who knows what a wizard might do ... even a dead one? Get word to Willen Ironmaul. Tell him what happened.”

The Daergar looked past him, at the dwarves mounting their steeds, and the foot companies assembling around them. “We heard the drums, Cale. What do they say?”

“They say the beast of the mist has struck again, this time much closer. It is somewhere north of Sky’s End.”

“Do we have troops there?”

“Mace Hammerstand is there with two mounted companies. Maybe we can trap the beast between us.”

“And if you trap it,” the Daergar said, frowning grimly, “can it be killed?”

“That’s what we may soon learn,” Cale told him.



A Taste of Rage

Mace Hammerstand beard the drums in the night and sent out spotters to observe a wide perimeter around the north slope of Sky's End Mountain. The thing of the mists had struck again, this time in the Vale of Respite, far to the east of its earlier attacks on dwarven settlements. It seemed to be moving in a wide arc, from somewhere in the western wilderness into the very heart of the dwarven realm.

"Keep a careful watch," he told his best spotters. "Especially watch the passes that come down from the Vale of Respite, just north of here. The thing may be making for the Road of Passage."

"Aye," a grim dwarf said. "But, Captain, what are we looking for? Has anyone ever seen the thing?"

"Not really. But we know it is large, walks on two feet—not like a person, but more like a turkey walks—and it has gliding wings and a long tail. But the thing to watch for is fog. If you see a mist that moves, report it. The thing cloaks itself in mist."

Throughout the night and the following day, spotters stood on every crag and bluff within five miles of the old citadel on Sky's End, their eyes roving the countryside. It was impossible to see everywhere—into each pass and crevice. Below the fanged peaks east of the Vale, the land was wild and rough—a terrain that stood on end with a hundred shadowed clefts and twisting canyons in every mile of it. But the dwarves surveyed all they could ... and saw nothing.

Among the members of the Roving Guard there was speculation. If the thing was indeed moving eastward, some said, the best thing might be to stand aside and let it proceed. Eastward lay the human realms and the great, seething city of Xak Tsaroth. Xak Tsaroth,

with its slave trade, its constant schemes and plots, its plundering, looting outriders, its wide-ranging tariff hoodlums, its gluttony for treasure, and the ambitions of its overlords, had been nothing but trouble to the dwarves of Kal-Thax as long as anyone could remember. If the fog beast was heading for Xak Tsaroth, some were inclined to cheer it on its way.

But between lay the Road of Passage, others pointed out. The great road was the result of a solemn treaty between Thorbardin and the knightly orders of southern Ergoth, and the dwarves were pledged to defend those who traveled it here, just as the knights defended those who traveled it in Ergoth.

With evening of the second day, scouts reported to Mace Hammerstand. Flashes had come from the west, double-mirror signals by last sunlight. Cale Greeneye and his Neidar, accompanied by Roving Guard troops, were in place beneath the crest of Valespine. The creature had passed there and was now somewhere between them. Mace Hammerstand was requested to move troops north to cut it off, while Cale Greeneye closed in from behind.

Then the sun was gone behind the western peaks, and the signals ended. But from the south, new drums sounded. They spoke of human wizards, and of threat to Thorbardin.

It was a dilemma for Mace Hammerstand. Cale Greeneye needed him to serve as anvil to Cale's hammer, to attack the killing beast. Yet the reason he was here was to guard the old tunnel against wizards, and now wizards were assembling.

"I'll have to divide forces," he told Mica Silvershield, his second. "You take two-thirds of our force and move northward, then form a perimeter. With luck, Cale's Neidar will drive the beast to you, and you can kill it."

"With luck and the help of Reorx," the golden-haired warrior added.

"Don't attack it all-out," Mace instructed. "When the thing comes to you, test it with thrusts and feints. Cale believes it cannot move rapidly. If you are in jeopardy, pull back slowly, and let the others come up behind it. Cale has seen the creature and knows more about it than anyone else. Follow his lead."

“And you, Captain?”

“I will remain on sentry here, with a hundred. The old tunnel must be guarded until Willen Ironmaul and the craftsmen can find a way to seal it forever.”

By twilight, the beast-fighters moved out, northward. “Reorx go with you!” Mace Hammerstand called after them. Then he turned his attention to the hundred remaining and the guarding of the tunnel behind the old citadel.

* * * * *

The thing called Rage was furious. In a wide valley she had found another cluster of the warm-blooded creatures and had attacked. But there had been few there to kill. Most of them had escaped, running ahead of her, spreading and disappearing into the distance. Those who remained had tried, in their puny way, to fight her, and that had been amusing. But the diversion had lasted only a few minutes. When they were all dead and torn asunder, she had vented her anger on their residences, their scattered flocks, and their inanimate possessions, but still it had been only a small diversion.

Raging and seething, wrapped in the rolling cloud of mist that the cold emanating from her always generated, she went on. The sun of day came and went, came and went, and she clambered up long slopes that led to towering peaks. Through a narrow pass she went, in dark of night, and started down the other side. It was then she realized that there were creatures behind her, following her. Instinct told her to find a hole and wait, to ambush them as they came past. There were many of them there—many to die for her pleasure. But ahead there were others, moving to block her path. To attack either group, she knew, would alert the others, would give them a chance to escape from her, and she wanted them all.

On the slopes below the pass she turned, heading southward at right angles to her previous direction. Cold, instinctive judgment told her that when the two groups of warm-bloods—the pursuers and the blockers—met, they would join and all become pursuers. They would follow her, but they would all be together. Then she could ambush the entire party. Get them all behind her, then she

could find a hole and lie in wait. She could kill them all if she could lead them into a lair.

Twilight deepened as she hurried along her way, following the slopes. Here she spread wide, stubby wings to glide over a chasm, there she paused to scatter piled boulders that blocked her way, and far behind her she sensed that the two groups of warm-bloods had joined and were coming after her. Through long hours of night she traveled as fast as she could, looking for a place to lie in wait—a place where standing obstructions might obscure the mists that were always with her until the warm creatures were close enough for her to attack.

In the dark hours before morning, she found the place. Where slopes curved away and a valley lay ahead, she raised her head high above the mists and looked around. And there, directly ahead on the slopes of a high peak that soared above the far side of the valley, were the old, crumbled walls of what had once been a structure. Instinct told her that she had found her trap-lair. She braced herself on gliding wings to plunge down the remaining slopes and far out into the valley, her mists trailing away behind her like a long, thin cloud in the starlight. When she touched down she was directly below the old walls on the slope. She headed for the structure, taloned feet thudding the ground as long, powerful legs drove her upward, swaying with a massive, birdlike rhythm that her long tail countered with its swing.

Closer and closer to the place she came, and suddenly stones rained down on her from above. There were more of the little warm-bloods up there, among the shadowed walls. She heard their shouts as stones—flung and rolled—bounced off her hard crust and clattered away down the slope behind her.

Lowering her great head she hesitated, letting thick fogs build around her, then she charged.

Breaking through the walls, she was met by a shower of slung stones, then by thrown implements of wood and metal. Most of them did her no harm, but a few struck her in the neck, and she felt dim, annoying pain. Ancient memories came back to her, of the time before her sleep when those she preyed upon had discovered that

they could wound her if they struck at her neck. It had done them no good. It had only angered her more, but she remembered it and lowered her head, protecting the neck, which was her only vulnerable part.

The warm creatures swirled around her, lashing out with blades and hammers, dim in the deepening mists, and she lashed back at them. With talon and fang, wings, legs, and sweeping tail, she raged among them, tearing them apart, crushing and sundering their frail bodies, killing and feasting in an ecstasy of rage.

There were dozens of them. Many dozens. Some might have gotten away in the turmoil, but instead of fleeing they pressed their attack, and she killed, killed, and killed. When a sharp pain hit her, she realized that one of the creatures had somehow gotten beneath her head and struck upward, cutting her neck. It was only a tiny wound, but she roared and reared upright, then plunged downward, going for the one that had cut her.

The creature dodged and rolled, and her flashing claws closed on two others who had stepped in to defend the fallen one. With teeth and talons she tore them apart and was looking for the other one when something caught her eye. Deep in shadows, behind the old walls, was a recess in the mountain's face. And at the back of the hollow was a blocked hole.

Turning from her carnage, Rage trotted into the recess and looked at the massive obstruction. With a few running steps she drove a shoulder into it and felt it sag. Again she hit it, and again, until it fell away. The hole behind it was a huge tunnel leading away into darkness. She roared, and the returning echoes told her that the tunnel ended some distance away ... either ended or was blocked. But that didn't matter. The pursuers were behind her, and they would come for her. She would be waiting. A hole like this was a perfect place for ambush. Let them follow her in here, and none would escape.

Back in the open, among the ruined walls, Rage roamed her killing field. Here and there she found a warm-blood still alive and crushed it. Then there were none left. A hundred sundered corpses littered the area, surrounded by the remains of their pitiful weapons

and bits of smashed armor. Had any of them escaped? she wondered. Certainly not more than one or two. These creatures had not tried to flee; they had stood and fought. They had even tried to counterattack.

At the outer wall she reared above her mists and saw one of the creatures limping away, down the slope toward the valley. She would have gone after it, but in the same glance she saw movement across the valley.

With a deep growl, Rage turned and headed for the hole she had found. Let the one go. She would wait for the many. Wading through the gore of her killing field, the great creature paused here and there to batter and rend the silent bodies of her victims, keeping low so that her fogs would hide her, and the walls would hide the fog. When her fury was momentarily satisfied, she crept out and walked eastward, letting her mists be seen and leaving distinct tracks. Then, out of sight of the valley, she climbed to a height, set her wide, stubby wings, and glided swiftly back to where she had started.

Behind the ruined walls again, she crept into the hole in the mountain. Deep into the darkness of the tunnel, she came to a second barricade. A stone plug, blocking the shaft. Carefully this time, almost gently, she worked it loose, turned it, and passed beyond, then turned to set it back in place. Now she would wait. The creatures would come; a few would explore and find nothing. But eventually, they would all come in. Then she would have them. Crouching in the darkness, as patient as time, Rage waited.

* * * * *

Mace Hammerstand was dying. He knew he was dying. His left arm was gone, bitten off above the elbow, and all his attempts to tie off the wound were not enough. His life's blood was seeping from him. Even worse, his chest had been crushed, and his lungs were filling with fluid.

Still, though, he kept going. The way was downhill, and he must go as far as he could, so that the thing at the citadel could not come and finish him off. Somewhere out there, in the valley or beyond,

were the remains of his Roving Guard and Cale Greeneye with his Neidar rangers.

He was dying. The world swam before his eyes, and he found he could not move anymore. He didn't remember falling, but he was down, lying across a stone on the hillside above the valley. Desperately, he clamped hard fingers over the stump of his left arm and squeezed until the pain cleared his vision. To keep from passing out, he pounded his heels against the rock, gritted his teeth, and tried to whistle. It wasn't much of a whistle. Blood from his pierced lungs choked him and started him coughing, and that brought more blood. He felt as though he were strangling.

Weakness flowed over him like a cold stream, and he fought it valiantly. He tried to count the moons rising in the sky, but they spun and danced around, and he lost track. He heard a voice and didn't know whether it was his own or someone else's. "Reorx give me strength," he whispered. "Reorx, don't let me turn loose yet. Everbardin can wait ... just a little longer."

Someone was kneeling beside him. Several someones, and others around them, dark, sturdy, bearded forms in the moonlight. Someone was calling his name, and again he squeezed the stump of his arm until the pain cleared his eyes. Slowly, he recognized some of them. Mica Silvershield was there, and Brune Tamal, and ... and many others, crowding around. And the one kneeling beside him, cradling his head on an arm that was like warm steel, was Cale Greeneye.

"Cale ..." Mace tried to speak, then erupted with coughing spasms that soaked him with his own blood. When the convulsions had passed, he tried again. "Cale, it was the beast. It found us ... at the citadel. We ... the hundred ... they are all dead."

"Be quiet, Mace," Cale soothed him. "We will find the thing. I promise you."

"Cale, we couldn't hurt it. Our blades bounced away. Until ... Cale, it *can* be hurt. Its neck. I cut it on the neck. Just ... a scratch, but it was a wound. Its neck, Cale. There, it can be hurt."

"I hear you, Mace." The Neidar's voice shook, and in the moonlight there was a tear on his cheek. "I will remember."

“Cale ...”

“Yes, Mace.”

“Cale, my wife, and our children ...”

“They will be seen to,” the Neidar promised.

“And Cale, tell Damon ...”

“What, Mace?”

“Tell him ... tell him I have been proud to be his friend.”

The last was a faint whisper, barely heard. Then the captain of Roving Guard let out a final, rasping breath, and his head rolled to the side. He was dead.

Cale let him down gently on the bloody rock and stood. “Let the drums speak,” he said. “Mace Hammerstand is dead. A hundred of the best have died, and the beast still lives.”

Around him a dozen signalers unslung their drums and began the song that was—in the way of the dwarves—both a message and a lament, a dirge for the respected dead.

“Everbardin,” Cale whispered, “take this one ... and the others ... home.”

* * * * *

First dawn lay on the peaks when the relayed drum-calls reached Damon Omenborn at the edge of the wilderness, a hundred miles southwest of the old citadel on Sky’s End.

Returning from Sheercliff toward Thorbardin had been a long, slow journey for the little party. Both Damon and Tag Salan knew that they were being followed, and Tag had seen their pursuer. It was the red-strap wizard from the cliffs, the one who called himself Megistal. He had a horse—one of their own lost animals, Tag thought—and was dogging their trail, pausing now and then to make shimmering rings appear in thin air—rings the wizard stared into as though searching.

Backtracking, Tag had seen him and watched him for a while, ducking out of sight each time the man made one of his spells. Somehow, he guessed with Theiwar intuition, the wizard would be able to see them and find them if he could once discover just where they were. So they made sure that he could not see them. They

zigzagged, doubled back, and kept to cover. The Einar girl, Willow Summercloud, became exasperated with them, but found that it was no use to argue.

It was Damon's intention to mislead the man enough so that when they came into settled lands he would know only their general direction of travel, not exactly where they were. Damon had felt the enormous power of the man's magic and had no wish to be caught in the open by some sorcerous spell whose source he could not even see, much less fight.

Thus, as they broke night camp in a place of thickets, within sight of Einar fields, the wizard was some distance south of them, following a false trail that might take him all day to sort out. In the distance to the east, beyond the settled lands, rose the massive bulks of Sky's End, Cloudseeker, and the Thunder Peaks. With luck, they could be safely within Thorbardin—with the color-shifting stone that the wizards had valued so much—before the mage could do anything about them.

And it was then, just at dawn, when the drum-calls came on the wind. Damon stood, cocking his head to listen, and his eyes narrowed.

"What is it?" Willow demanded, closing a pack. "Has something happened?"

"Hush!" Damon snapped, still listening. Tag Salan, a few yards away, was listening, too, but seemed puzzled. He understood a little of the drum-speak, as most Thorbardin dwarves had learned to, but only a little. There was far more in the songs of the drums, subtleties of tone and rhythm, things that only a Hylar could truly decipher.

After a moment, Damon turned and looked at the others. "The fog beast has been at Sky's End," he said. "There were guards there, and it attacked them."

Tag felt a chill go up his spine. "Guards? Who?"

"The Roving Guard, Tag." Damon lowered his eyes. "Mace Hammerstand, and a hundred. They are all dead. The thing killed them."

Tag stared at him with stricken eyes. "Mace ... my captain, dead?"

Damon nodded. "All dead," he said. "The thing battered down the gate of the old tunnel, but they don't know where it is now. Runners with torches went as far as the second barrier and found it still standing."

"Damon, that thing ..." Tag started, then took a deep breath to control the anger rising within him. "The wizards on the cliff. They did something. They woke it up, and now it is loose."

"Yes. The wizards." Damon raised his eyes, and Willow Summercloud gasped at the sight of his face. Even Tag Salan stared, startled. In the big Hylar's narrowed eyes blazed an anger that was as hot as forge-fires and as cold as ice. In ninety years, no one had ever seen Damon Omenborn angry. It had seemed as though the big, affable Hylar simply did not have the cold steel of fury within him. But now a palpable force as strong as winter winds seemed to blaze from his eyes. Willow backed away, clutching her axe, her eyes wide. Tag Salan felt as though he were staring into pure wrath.

"Come on," Damon said softly. "No more games with that red-strap. Let him just hope he does not find us before we get home." He lifted the flap of his belt-pouch, took out the Stone of Threes, and gazed at it icily. "This is important to the mages, is it? Well, that's just fine. Because this is something that they shall never have as long as I am alive."

"There are other wizards, Damon," Tag said. "If it's that important, they will come searching for it. They will come to Thorbardin."

"Then let them come," Damon said. "Let them see our gates ... once, before they die."

Willow was still gaping at him. Along the way, she had entered a swampy thicket to gather berries, and now mud and stain was smeared across her face, adding to the soot and ash that had been there since the first time they had seen her. "You ... you really hate the humans that much?"

"Humans?" He shook his head. "I have nothing against humans, girl. Not all of them, anyway. But I have a score to settle with those

who are so ... so *corrupt* that they practice magic.”

In a nearby thicket, something moved, and a strong voice said, “By that speech, dwarf, you have saved yourself an arrow through the heart.”

They spun around, weapons at hand, as a tall fierce-looking man stepped from cover. An arrow was notched in the bow he carried, but it was lowered. “My name is Quist Redfeather,” he said. “And I have a score to settle, too. Especially with that magic-user that you have been leading in circles.”

* * * * *

High overhead, a bird wheeled in the morning sunlight—a bird far larger than any who happened to see it from the ground might guess.

Cawe had seen the gathering of wizards in the cove among the southern peaks and wanted no part of them. They were nowhere near Sheercliff, nowhere near the raptor aviaries high in the Anviltops, and they were none of his business. Still, the little creature on his back insisted on a further look around, and now she had spotted the three dwarves from Sheercliff far below. In high-pitched birdsong, she begged and pleaded for Cawe to take her down to them so that she could tell them about the mages gathering in the mountains.

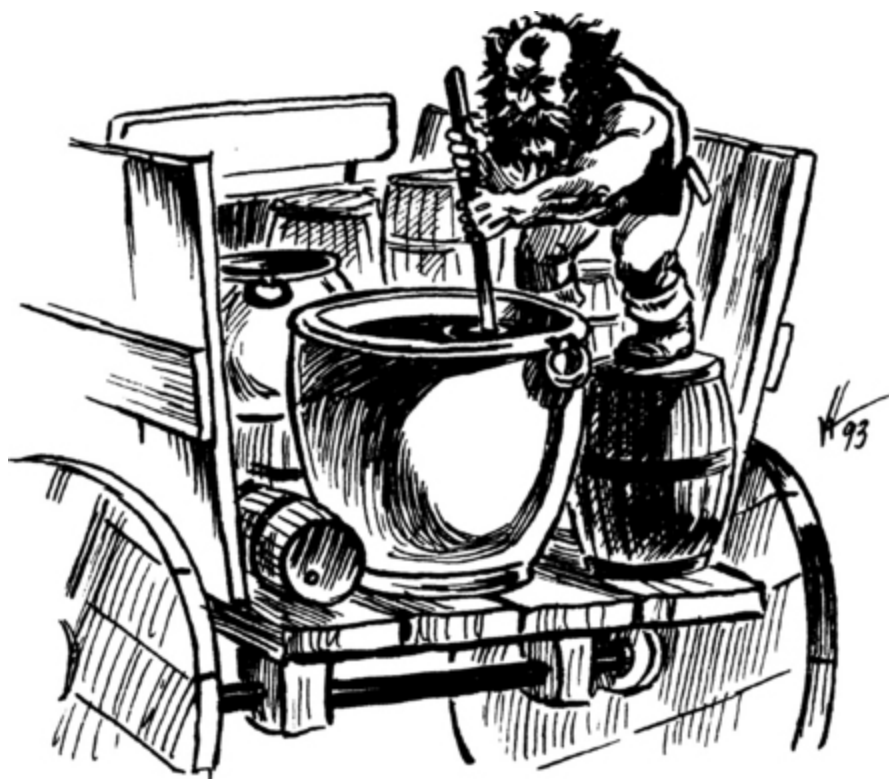
Finally, Cawe relented. No, he would not take her to them. There was too much settlement where they were, too much chance of being seen and challenged by creatures of their kind. Creatures of Cawe’s kind had learned, a long time ago, that the best way for raptors to deal with people of any kind was to simply avoid them. People did not understand giant birds, and most encounters led only to trouble.

Ahead, though, where a great mountain rose against the bright sky, were vast, high areas where no settlements were visible. Huge hawk-eyes roved the landscape there. High on the shoulder of the centermost of the great peaks, a deep, walled valley beckoned—a place where even a raptor might land unnoticed. Cawe set his wings

and headed for a secluded landing. He would let the kender off there, and she could find her own way to the dwarves.

The raptor realized that he might never see the little creature again. It was the way of kender, to come and go as they pleased. In many ways, it would be a relief if this kender never returned to the Anviltops. She was often a nuisance.

And yet, the great creature—whose kind were called peak-masters by those who knew of them—admitted to himself that he would probably miss Shillitec Medina Quickfoot when she was gone. The sedate, reclusive life of the raptor—after having associated with a kender for a time—was likely to be a bit dull.



12

Tinker's Blast

Shaft Redstone, delvemaster of all the Daewar, and Cambit Steelsheath, Thorbardin's warden of ways, had burned many a candle in their search for a way to obliterate the old Daewar tunnel through Sky's End but had been unable to come up with any plan that would require less than five years of labor. Surprisingly enough, it was the lorekeeper, Quill Runebrand, who suggested the idea that the regent, Willen Ironmaul, decided to try.

The keeper of scrolls had invited himself to supper at the regent's quarters on the pretext of wanting to enscroll Willen Ironmaul's proclamations so that they could be copied and posted in each city and marketplace. Actually, his visit was more because of Tera Sharn than because of Willen Ironmaul. The regent's wife—Damon Omenborn's mother—was a lovely, gracious, and wise person, always full of insight about subjects that sometimes puzzled Quill, and in addition she was the daughter of the almost legendary Colin Stonetooth, first chieftain of the Hylar. Much of the lore that Quill had compiled about the origins of his own ancestral people came from chats with Tera Sharn. And, even better than all that, Tera Sharn was an excellent cook.

Now, as Quill sat with Willen Ironmaul and Cable Graypath, First of the Ten, at the plank table in the new regent's quarters in Hybardin, he gazed around the room thoughtfully. Among most of the other races of Krynn, Quill assumed, a great chieftain would live in lavish style. In the human city of Xak Tsaroth, it was said, the palace of the High Overlord contained a hundred separate rooms, most of them as big as assembly halls. Trading elves had spoken of the tall, beautiful towers of far-off Silvanesti. Even among goblins,

he had heard, wherever a settlement of filthy hovels and noxious caves developed, the highest ranking goblin usually claimed a hovel or cave several times as large as any others around it.

But it had never been so with the dwarves, and the Hylar were no exception. Willen Ironmaul was the revered chieftain of the Hylar, and now he was also the regent of all of Thorbardin. But the living quarters that he and Tera Sharn occupied consisted of four simple rooms located in a high delving within the Life Tree stalactite. The partitions were of simple stone-block construction, and the crossed runes of Hylar and leader, carved into the wood of the outer door, was the only indication that anyone important lived here. In size and construction the home of the chieftain was much the same as any other home in Hybardin. Stone ceilings were whitewashed, as were most Hylar ceilings, though Theiwar ceilings tended to be gray or brown, and Daewar ceilings were rampant with bright colors and intricate designs. The walls were hung with subtle, elegant tapestries of Tera Sharn's selection, and the furniture was simple, tasteful, and sturdy. In addition, each room had lens-and-mirror murals to carry light from the sun-tunnels.

In all, it was a typical Hylar dwelling and—except for varying tastes in ornamentation, coloration, and placement of things—typical of most dwarven quarters in most of the dwarven cities that Quill had seen.

What was not typical was the aroma that floated in from the next room, where Tera Sharn had supper cooking over a grate of glowing coals. Quill's nostrils twitched with pleasure. The aroma was rich and subtle, laced lightly with a blend of the fine spices the Klar produced in the farm warrens and those traded from human gatherers in the realm of the orders of Ergoth.

"If ever I marry," Quill commented, "I shall choose a wife who can cook as well as the lady Tera ... if in fact there are any others who can." He breathed the tantalizing aroma, and his nose wrinkled as he thought of other, far less pleasant things he had smelled recently.

Then Tera came through the archway, carrying a copper tray laden with her cuisine, and Quill's eyes widened. "Eggs?" he gulped.

“Are those eggs?”

“Of course they are eggs.” Tera smiled at the keeper of scrolls. “Freshly harvested from the pigeon-roosts above the Valley of the Thanes. Some of the women gather them there and trade them at the Daewar market.”

Willen glanced at the lorekeeper. “You seem surprised, Quill. Don’t you eat eggs?”

“Of course I do.” Quill nodded, feeling foolish. “I ... forgive my absentmindedness, Lady Tera. I was thinking of eggs when you brought those in, but in quite another context.”

“What context is that?” Willen asked.

“I was thinking about that old tinker with his hideous mixtures. The one who keeps trying to find fuel for tin forges and instead belabors the ethers with the smell of rotten eggs.”

“Pack Lodestone,” Cable Graypath reminded him. “I won’t forget that smell soon either.”

“Or the noise.” Quill grinned. “Just a few little buckets of ... of ‘stuff,’ and he shook the entire north face of Cloudseeker.”

“That’s it!” Willen Ironmaul rumbled. “By Reorx, I believe that is *it!*”

“What is, dear?” Tera asked.

“The old Daewar tunnel,” Willen said. “Rust! I should have thought of it myself!”

“Thought of what?” Quill stared at his leader.

“That’s the problem with being chief of chiefs,” Willen proclaimed. “When a person has too many things on his mind, he can’t think through any of them. Wizards running loose in our mountains. And some *thing* out there killing people for the sheer joy of killing...” He glanced at Cable. “Have we heard anything yet from Cale or the Roving Guard?”

“Nothing yet.” The First of the Ten shook his head.

“And Damon’s out there somewhere, with no regard for how worried his mother is...”

“I’m not really worried about Damon, dear,” Tera reassured him. “After all, he is his father’s son. He can take care of himself.”

“You’re worried half-sick!” Willen snapped.

“Well,” Tera said, “someone here is, certainly.”

“... and trying to get Northgate usable, and then there is Gem Bluesleeve’s idea about the left side of the Shaft of Reorx ...”

“What idea?”

“Never mind. I’m still thinking about it. Anyway, with all this on my mind, I’ve also been worrying about the old Daewar tunnel. Gran Stonemill is right, you know. It is a weakness in our defenses. Magic might penetrate it. But I couldn’t come up with any idea what to do about it until just now when Quill suggested the answer.”

“What answer?” Quill asked, mystified.

“It just might work,” Willen muttered to himself. “Cable, get a message to Olim Goldbuckle. Tell him to round up his ancient tinker.... What’s his name?”

“Pack Lodestone?”

“Yes, him. Tell him to bring Pack Lodestone and a team of delvers and meet me at Northgate. Oh, and tell him to bring as many buckets of that ’stuff the oldster plays with as can be had. We’ll need a lot of it. Tell him to meet me right away.”

“Aye.” The First of the Ten was on his feet, looking puzzled but ready to obey. Willen pushed back his stool and stood, glancing around for his helmet, shield, and hammer.

“Willen!” Tera snapped. “Whatever it is, you can at least finish your dinner!”

“Oh. Yes.” The chief of chiefs sat again. “I suppose you’re right. Quill, pass the eggs.” To Cable, he said, “And have horses ready below Northgate, with carts and supply packs. We have a long way to go.”

“Where?” Quill wondered,

“To Sky’s End!” Willen snapped. “To the old tunnel! What do you think I’ve been talking about?”

“I’m not sure I have any real idea,” Quill admitted.

“Willen, you can’t go!” Tera said sternly. “You’re regent of Thorbardin now. You can’t go off on missions outside. You’re needed here.”

“Oh, rust!” Willen subsided, realizing that she was right. “Life was much simpler when I was just a soldier,” he muttered, “even when I

was an ordinary chief. And Olim can't go, either, because he's meeting with the wardens. Well ...” He turned to gaze at Quill Runebrand. “Since it was your idea, Quill, I appoint you chief of the project. You'll be in charge; I suggest you leave immediately. It's more than fifty miles from Northgate to the old citadel, and there's no time to lose.”

Quill stared at his leader, wide-eyed. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Just what you suggested! Go to the citadel and seal that tunnel so that not even mages can get in. Make it a tunnel that never was. Obliterate it.”

“But I don't know ...”

“I have a hunch your idea will work very well.” Willen nodded. “We'll discuss it while you eat your eggs.”

Thus it was that, when the drums spoke of the massacre of Mace Hammerstand and his hundred at the old citadel in front of the Daewar tunnel, Quill Runebrand, keeper of scrolls, was well on his way toward that place, leading a strange procession. In addition to armed guards and flankers, his company included dozens of Daewar delvers with tool-carts piled high, three wagons loaded with pots and casks of such substances as leached ash, powdered brimstone, cave salts, free soot, and finely ground graphite, and an ancient white-haired Daewar putterer riding guard over an assemblage of mixing vats, dry-forges, and strange tools.

Through a moonlit night they traveled as fast as their Daergar night-guides could trot, and when the dawn brought the sound of drums they were high on the eastern slopes of Sky's End, heading around the bulge of the great peak by precipitous trails, heading for the northeast crests.

First light brought a dizzying vista of enormous distances—the lesser promontories of the giant mountain rising beyond their shallow coves, and beyond them, miles away and thousands of feet lower, the winding ribbon of the Road of Passage coming up from human Ergoth toward the Great Gorge where old Kal-Thax began. In the far distance were the spreading, vast plains of southern Ergoth—the realm of humans.

But few among the hurrying travelers on this morning paused to marvel at the view. The drums had told them of the massacre—by some creature that seemed to be pure rage—of Mace Hammerstand and his hundred guards.

Quill had drummers come forward to respond, to learn who was at the scene and what was happening. Cale Greeneye and a force of Neidar rangers were there, the drum-call answered, along with the remaining companies of the Roving Guard from Thorbardin. Leaderless now, the Thorbardin companies had attached themselves to the Neidar and were awaiting orders.

And where was the thing, the killing beast?

They did not know, except that it seemed to have gone east. Tracks had been found, but not yet followed.

Quill hurried back to the wagons where old Pack Lodestone guarded his arcane barrels and casks. “You can start mixing your concoctions now, revered one,” he said. “We will soon be where they are needed.”

“Concoctions?” Pack fussed. “Failed concoctions, so far. What good is a forge fuel that refuses to burn in a civilized manner? Who wants stuff that does nothing but stink and blow up? Maybe I’ll try something a little different this time.”

“To tarnish with your forge fuel!” Quill snapped. “What we want is exactly what you did last time, outside of Northgate. Do you remember?”

“Of course I remember! What do you think I am? Senile?” The old dwarf cocked his head, raising one bushy eyebrow. “What do you want that stuff for?”

“Never mind what I want it for,” Quill said. “Using it is my job. Making it is yours. Just be sure you make a lot of it.”

By the time the caravan came in sight of the old citadel, downslope on the shoulder of the great mountain, old Pack Lodestone was busily stirring great vats of gray-black, dusty-looking substance atop the rolling wagon, complaining and muttering to himself. “This is no proper way to combine a mixture. Probably be a lot better if I could saturate all of this for blending, then set up drying tables. Better compound, that way. Far more control of

consistency. Of course, it would all have to be reground after it dried. But he says do it like last time, so I'll do it like last time. Quick and dirty and who cares? Rust and corruption! These youngsters! All push and prod, and not a single ounce of patience to the dozen of them...."

While Quill went down to confer with Cale Greeneye, the Daewar delvers went to work high on the slope, half a mile above and behind the old abandoned citadel that guarded the opening of the Daewar tunnel. With chisels and mauls, picks and prybars, scoops and stone drills, they began a wide, narrow cut in the stone of the mountain—a cut that would wedge downward to a distance of at least forty feet. And as they worked, Pack Lodestone fumed and muttered and mixed vat after vat of dry, gray-black dust made of cave salt collected by roaming Klar foragers, yellow brimstone from Einar delvings north of Redrock, and a blend of ground graphite from Daergar mines and powdered soot harvested from the shields of Theiwar furnaces.

Quill Runebrand wandered among the carnage of the beast's killing field, following Cale Greeneye. The bodies—and pieces of bodies—of the murdered guardsmen had been removed for burial, but the signs of slaughter were everywhere. Bits of armor, broken weapons and implements, shreds of clothing, and ruined field packs were strewn about like rubbish, and everywhere—on the ground, on the walls, even overhead where old timbers still jutted—was drying, congealing blood. The carcasses of several horses, not yet removed, were mute evidence of the awful fury of the thing that had killed them. They were literally torn to pieces.

"What ... what sort of thing would do this?" Quill asked, stunned and ashen-faced.

"Rage," the Neidar said. "Its name is Rage."

"You know its name? How?"

"It could have no other name," Cale said icily.

At the battered seal of the old tunnel, Quill stared at the broken stone plug and the dark shadows beyond it.

"It did this?"

“It is very strong,” Cale affirmed. “It broke the seal down and went inside, but then it came out again and went eastward. Don’t worry. I had runners with torches search inside. The second seal is still in place.”

“So much for an impregnable seal.” Quill shook his head. “By Reorx, I hope what we are doing here works.”

“Exactly what are you doing?” Cale looked uphill, where delving was in progress.

“We are going to ... at least we hope to ... look, I’d just as soon not try to explain. If it works, I’ll tell you about it afterward. Just accept that Willen Ironmaul ordered us to try, and we are trying. But in the meantime—just in case it *does* work—I’d suggest you and all your people back off until we are finished.”

“Back off? How far?”

“I don’t know.” Quill shrugged. “For safety’s sake, I’d say at least a mile.”

“A *mile*?” The Neidar gaped at him, then shrugged. “If you say so. But let me know when you’ve finished.”

Quill stroked his beard, gazing thoughtfully up the slope. “Oh, if it works, you’ll know.”

* * * * *

The finest delvers in the known world were the Daewar of Thorbardin. And the delvers with Quill Runebrand were the best of those. Before the sun stood above the Anviltops to the west, their trench was completed. It was a V-shaped trough, cut straight downward into the slope. It ran for a thousand feet straight across the mountainside and was forty-eight feet at its deepest part, in the center.

Along the upper side of the cut a hundred dwarves worked with barrows and spades, dumping layer after layer of the stuff Pack Lodestone had mixed. Like coarse black dust, the mixture cascaded down to bury the bottom of the trench. When all of it had been shoveled in, the entire bottom of the cut was a wide path of black, seven feet deep. By Pack’s estimation, they had deposited three tons of the mixture. Quill Runebrand guessed it was closer to five.

When all that was done, dwarven workers trundled stone cuttings to the trough and dumped them in, burying all but the center five feet of black material under fifteen feet of rubble. Then, carefully, Quill lit a lantern, hung it from a braced wooden frame above the exposed center of the cut, and looped a noose of light cable around the frame's supporting brace. Like people walking on eggs, the dwarves hurried away uphill, playing out line behind them as they went. Three hundred yards uphill they ran out of line. "This will have to do," Quill said.

The delvers and crew dwarves bellied down behind whatever cover they could find, crouching behind boulders and outcroppings, cringing in shallow holes, while the armed guardsmen ringed them, holding shields above themselves and the workers.

Quill glanced aside at Pack Lodestone. "You're sure you mixed that stuff just like before?"

"Of course I'm sure," the old dwarf snapped. "Do you think I don't know my business?"

"If your business is making fuel for tinsmith forges, I'm not sure," Quill admitted.

"So it went wrong," Pack grumped. "At least give me credit for being consistent."

"Well, I guess we're about to find out," the lorekeeper said. With a muttered reminder to Reorx about dwarves being his best and therefore favored people, Quill tugged at the cable. The long line scratched against the downslope, came taut, and Quill pulled harder. Far below, the bright lantern on its frame jiggled and swayed. Then, abruptly, the frame support pulled free, and the frame sagged. The lantern dropped into the hole.

For an instant, nothing happened. Then, with a roar like all the thunders ever heard, the cut in the mountainside erupted, spewing a sheer, hurtling wall of stone, dust, and smoke skyward, propelled by a blinding flash of light. Higher and higher the debris flew, rising toward the feathery clouds far above, driven upward by a giant wall of instant fire. The rising clouds caught the late sunlight and flared to brilliant life. The very mountain slope seemed to shiver, and little landslides of gravel and dust swept down in rivulets along a mile or

more of mountainside. The thunderous roar was drowned by a deeper, rumbling thunder that grew in volume.

“Great Reorx’s red rivets!” someone shouted. “Quill, what have you done?”

The wall of debris blanked out the entire vista to the north and east, seeming to grow higher by the second. Then a pebble bounced off a guardsman’s shield, and a fist-sized rock thumped into the ground an inch from Quill’s knee. More stones fell, and more, a pelting shower of debris pummeling and battering the entire slope like stone rain. And below, lost in the dust and smoke, the ominous roar became a deafening, cascading drumbeat of sound, growing louder and louder.

Minutes passed, and still it rained stone on the slope of Sky’s End. Then the thunder of falling debris faded, and the roaring, cascading noise became more distant, rumbling away down the mountainside. Here and there, guardsmen tilted their shields, and workers peered out into the haze of dust that was just beginning to clear as winds from above swept down the slope. The near edge of the great, delved cut became visible, but beyond it, there seemed to be nothing. Quill Runebrand and Pack Lodestone crept from their shelter, peered around, then started down the slope, followed by others.

At the cut, they stopped and gawked. Where there had been a neat, delved cleft across the mountainside, now there was a cliff, forty feet high. Beyond the foot of it was altered terrain. The entire slope below was a sea of gravel and debris slanting downward toward the old citadel ... or where the old citadel should have been. There was nothing visible there now. A massive avalanche had buried everything beneath millions of tons of stone rubble. And strong on the evening air was the stench of rotten eggs.

Carefully, they scaled down the new cliff and made their way to what they guessed was the level where the citadel had been. There was nothing there. The avalanche caused by Pack Lodestone’s mixed powders had carried away everything standing and buried the entire site—in fact, the entire mountainside—fifty to a hundred feet deep.

“It worked,” Quill breathed. Impulsively, he grabbed Pack Lodestone by the shoulders and danced the old dwarf around in enthusiastic circles. “It worked!” he crowed. “The old tunnel is gone. Gone as though it had never been here! Nothing, not magic nor beasts nor armies nor the passing of ages, will open it again! The tunnel is a tunnel no more! It is a tunnel that never was!”

“Let go of me!” Pack growled, breaking away to glare at the lorekeeper. “Of course it worked. I made that stuff myself.”



13

A Strange Alliance

Pack Lodestone's blast—or, as the scrolls of Thorbardin would record it, Quill Runebrand's blast—changed for all time the profile of the lower northeast slopes of Sky's End Peak. Cascading stone was sheared away from the mountain's face by the explosion, leaving a fresh smoke-blackened precipice along the farthest shoulder, a precipice that tapered downward as it curved around the mountainside. Below, a new feature was added. The great avalanche spread a deep slope of heavy rubble downward and outward, fanning out on the curvature of the mountainside to bury everything in its path. The old citadel, built by Daewar in times long gone, no longer existed. The tunnel which had begun there, leading through Sky's End to what was now Thorbardin, was buried beneath masses of stone, capped by a huge shelf of granite that had sheared away and fallen with the lesser debris.

The entire fan of fallen stone extended for more than a mile, and a side quake to the southeast had dumped other stone-fall down a deep cove, almost to the bridge where the Road of Passage crossed the Great Gorge. The rockfall had stopped just short of destroying the bridge. Secondary avalanches above the main shear, high on the face of the peak, had opened deep rifts in the mountainside on each side of a natural prominence, and spilled stone-fall downward to create twin swales below.

Forever after, the northeast face of Sky's End—as seen from the human lands across the Gorge, beyond the foothills, and on a clear day from as far away as Xak Tsaroth—would resemble the face of a giant, angry dwarf with deep-set, narrowed eyes, bushy brows, and a pug nose above a wide, downturned mouth beneath which spread

a wide, full beard. The side-fall, south and east above the bridge, even resembled a thick, powerful fist raised in challenge. It was a sculpture that, even though accidental, would stand for centuries as the largest piece of statuary in the entire world.

Quill Runebrand was ecstatic at the success of his venture, and most of those with him were shocked and stunned at what had occurred. Those below, who had waited in the valley, had mixed emotions for a time. Guard units spent most of the night rounding up the horses that had bolted and scattered at the explosion, and a company of dour Neidar set off immediately around the slopes to see what damage might have been done to the road and the bridge. It was bright morning before everyone was reassembled.

“You’re just lucky that fall stopped short of the bridge,” Cale Greeneye pointed out to the lorekeeper. “I expect the Council of Thaness would have personally drawn and quartered you had the bridge gone down.”

“I guess we used more mix than was really required,” Quill conceded. “But you’ll have to admit, nothing is going into that tunnel again. It would take a cataclysm to open it.”

* * * * *

For many miles around, the explosion had various results. The flash was seen as far away as the border posts below the promontory, east of Southgate, where a dwarven trade caravan had just delivered a large supply of weapons to human traders. It was the biggest single order of crafted armaments ever traded outside Kal-Thax. Thousands of fine dwarven steel blades, shields, helms, and various weapons of force were on their way east, into Ergoth. Where they were going was a secret even to the dwarves. Still, the third Lord Charon, whom the dwarves had learned to trust, had given his word to Olim Goldbuckle that the weapons were not for use in any way against Thorbardin.

Olim had his own ideas, though, about who wanted the weapons and why. The wily Daewar and his merchant-spies kept close watch on the world outside. Even better than the wide-ranging Neidar,

Olim Goldbuckle knew the ebbs and flows of the realms beyond the dwarven lands.

“I suspect they are going to Xak Tsaroth,” he had told Willen Ironmaul when the trade order was first received.

“To the overlords?” Willen frowned.

“No, but maybe to those who are tired of the overlords.” Olim replied, grinning.

* * * * *

At Northgate of Thorbardin, the blast was felt and its echoes heard, and guards were redoubled the length of Anvil’s Echo.

On the western slopes of Cloudseeker Mountain, a tiny creature, half the height and a fourth the weight of a male dwarf, had just completed the scaling of a great wall to get out of the hole where her bird had left her. It had taken her most of a day to climb from the bottom of what the dwarves called the Valley of the Thanes up to the face of the mountain, and when the shock waves from fifty miles away reached her, they tumbled her backward, flailing and grasping, halfway down the height she had just climbed. For a time she clung there, hanging on to precarious fingerholds, then she took a deep breath and blinked big, lustrous eyes. “Wow!” she breathed. “I wish I’d seen whatever that was!”

* * * * *

Surreptitious wizards, making their way toward Thorbardin from the southeast, dived for cover when the sky lit up from the explosion, and several of them whispered abrupt spells, not well thought out. The resulting havoc was intense. Shielding spells collided with shielding spells, and wizards flew in all directions. Fires blazed up here and there, rain fell in several places, a whirlwind danced among them, and a sprig of thorny adze-brush became a nest of hissing, writhing vipers.

Days would pass before the wizards got themselves all sorted out and despelled—and before those few who had inadvertently sent themselves on long journeys could be found and brought back.

* * * * *

In a clearing beyond the Einar fields below Cloudseeker, three pairs of eyes turned abruptly northward when the explosion occurred. One pair of eyes was dwarven, the other two human, and they glanced aside only momentarily before returning to the business at hand. All day the three had been here, in this clearing; the situation was a standoff. Damon Omenborn had contrived the circumstances, then gone off toward Thorbardin with Willow Summercloud tagging after him.

Those who remained were the dour Theiwar guardsman, Tag Salan, the human Cobar warrior, Quist Redfeather, and the red-strap wizard, Megistal.

Damon had told them to wait until he returned, and wait they did, because Tag Salan demanded it.

The wizard was protected from the Cobar only by the fact that Quist Redfeather had given his word to the dwarves that—as long as Megistal behaved himself—he would not put an arrow into him. The Cobar, in turn, was protected from the wizard's spells by the fact that, at first hint of sorcery, Tag Salan had solemnly promised to bury a heavy axe in the wizard's skull.

And the Theiwar was protected from the two humans by their intense dislike for each other, as well as by their curiosity. Damon Omenborn had hinted to each of the men that he had some ideas that might benefit them.

It was a strange alliance, but one that Damon Omenborn had decided might prove productive. First, though, he had a many-colored stone and an Einar girl to deliver safely to Thorbardin. They had taken the humans' horses, which—Damon pointed out bluntly—were from the herds of Thorbardin and therefore had never belonged to either of the humans to begin with.

* * * * *

In the teeming human city of Xak Tsaroth, the flash on Sky's End Peak was seen as far-off lightning, and the rumble of sound—when it arrived—was like distant thunder. From the grand palaces of the overlords to the filth and stench of the slave pens, from the teeming

thieves' markets to the wall-top barracks of the city's custodians, from the shacks and hovels of commoners to the lavish lairs of court fops and tariff-takers, the city on that evening was alive with rumors and whispers. Armed companies of custodians were everywhere, roaming the streets and alleys with torches lit and swords in hand, and in every inn and garret people gathered to speculate in hushed tones.

Darr Bolden was alive, they said. Darr Bolden had escaped the overlords and had emptied the dungeons where many of his followers had been held. Darr Bolden, leader of the secret Society of Freeman, was somewhere in Xak Tsaroth, and his followers were gathering to him by the thousands. The Freeman were arming themselves, and Darr Bolden had promised more arms—a blade and shield for every man willing to follow him against the overlords.

Where he would get such weapons, no one knew. But the whispers went on and on. Darr Bolden had done the impossible before. Maybe he would do it again. Maybe—just possibly—the Freeman might rid Xak Tsaroth of the tyranny and corruption which for so long had weighed upon its citizens.

* * * * *

And there was another who heard—and felt—the explosion that changed the visage of Sky's End. Patiently she had waited, sure that they would come to her—the warm-blooded creatures outside the tunnel. Hidden behind her reset stone gate, she waited, ready to rage and kill. But they did not come. Instead, the mountain shook and rumbled, and the tunnel filled with choking dust. And when she went to see what had happened, she could not get out. Even her great strength was nothing against the mass of solid, fallen stone that sealed the tunnel's end.

For a time she raged and stormed, up and down the dark length of the hole in which she was caught. Once before, in ancient times, she had been trapped and buried by those who feared and hated her. Now it had happened again. But she was not frozen in ice this time. She was awake and angry and able to strike back. Cold with a fury that filled the tunnel with thick mists, she went deeper into the

mountain. There had been two seals; maybe there were more that she could break. Maybe this tunnel had another end, somewhere. And, if it did, maybe *they* were there—the pathetic creatures who had trapped her. If so, they would all die horribly. She would see to that. She was Rage, and they could not stop her.

* * * * *

When the explosion on Sky's End occurred, Damon Omenborn was already in Thorbardin making his way toward the Life Tree with a grim, determined Willow Summercloud following after him. Several times he had tried to get rid of her—to leave her in the care of dwarves who would look after her and see that she had quarters and food—but she had refused. With a stubbornness that even the most hardheaded Daergar would have admired, she stuck to the big Hylar, trudging along after him even as her eyes darted here and there, gazing at the wonders of this underground world which she had never seen.

She knew about Thorbardin, of course. Every Einar did, and many had visited the undermountain fortress. For years Willow had heard stories of the mighty undertaking of the bonded Thaness of Hylar, Daewar, Theiwar, Daergar, and Klar—the tribes that those outside had begun to refer to collectively as Holgar, or mountain dwarves—who were building whole cities beneath a great peak. But hearing the stories was one thing, and seeing the place quite another.

In all her life, in her little village of Windhollow, she had never seen as many people as she saw now at every glance. By the hundreds and thousands, they thronged the ways and concourses, busy dwarves of all ages and every description going here and there, doing this and that. Anvils rang and forges puffed, the ring of delving seemed to come from everywhere, and the buzz of hundreds of voices was a constant hum of sound. She marveled at mighty lifts, carrying stage after stage of dwarves up and down shafts. She gaped at a long string of cable-carts on rail tracks, disappearing into a side tunnel that was itself larger than the entire village of Windhollow had been. She stared in wonder at people pausing to drink from wall-mounted stone troughs where fresh water flowed, and her

nostrils twitched at the delicious odors coming from a bakery where dozens of dwarves worked at ovens, turning out great loaves of dark-meal bread while people lined up to buy the loaves hot and fresh.

High above, in the soaring ceilings, she saw the sun-tunnels she had heard of and marveled at the massive glass artifacts, gathering and shedding the evening light from outside. She wondered how they would look in the daytime with sunlight coming through.

And when she caught her first glimpse of the Urkhan Sea, it so bedazzled her that she dropped her axe. It clattered on smooth stone paving, and she stooped to retrieve it, then gazed again at the marvel before her. She had heard that there was a lake in Thorbardin, but she had never imagined anything so marvelous as her eyes now beheld. The lake was large, its far shores dim and distant, the deep waters catching evening light from above and reflecting it upward from luminous green depths. It was a magnificent sight, but it seemed only a simple setting for what rose above its center. There, standing above the waters, spreading toward the cavern's ceiling a half mile above, was the mighty stalactite called the Life Tree of the Hylar. Solid, living stone, it shone with dark lusters that reflected themselves in the waters beneath it. And spreading outward from its "base" were busy, bustling wharves and piers, fronting the entrances to the delvings of Hybardin.

Willow stopped and stared, then hurried to catch up to Damon. "Where are we going?" she panted.

He looked down at her and shook his head as though in defeat. "I'm going to the Life Tree," he said. "I have things to do. Why don't you just ... well, relax and look around? Or get yourself a meal. There are all sorts of places to eat around here. You won't need coin. Just say that you are my guest. Maybe you can find a nice place to sleep and get to know some of the people."

"I said," she repeated, "where are *we* going?"

He shook his head again and pointed toward the lake. "Out there," he said. "That's where I live."

"Hybardin," she said, testing the word. "How do we get there?"

“By cable-boat,” he said. “Just like anyone else.”

The boat was about thirty feet in length, operated by Theiwar boatmen. It had large, chain-driven winches at each end and a boarding plank joining it to the low wooden dock. Willow followed Damon aboard, stepping carefully to avoid the crowd of dwarves already aboard. They were mostly Hylar, all males with the dark, swept-back beards of their kind, though among them were a few golden-haired Daewar, broad-shouldered Theiwar, and two or three masked Daergar. Most of them wore armor, and all of them seemed to know Damon. Several waved at him, some greeted him, and most turned, then, to gaze at Willow.

As she passed a row of filled benches, she barely overheard a whisper between two of those there, “Where do you suppose Damon found *her*?” And the answer, “I don’t know, but if there are any more like her there, I’ll take the next patrol.”

She felt a flush rise in her cheeks, but kept her head down and followed until Damon found them a place to sit, almost in the bow of the boat. The Theiwar wincher there nodded at the big Hylar, smiled at Willow, and called, “Full!”

The call was echoed from the other end of the boat, someone pushed off the gangplank, and the winches rattled as the boat headed out across the faintly luminous waters of the Urkhan Sea. Above, a sun-tunnel caught the final light of dusk and magnified a star that appeared in its field. Waves lapped at the side of the boat, and combs of spray rose off its bows. Willow shifted slightly, moving closer to Damon, then glanced at his face and frowned. He seemed, momentarily, to be far off. And a great sadness glinted in his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Willow asked. There was no answer; he seemed not to have heard. After a moment the Theiwar boatman leaned toward her, raised a hand to his lips, and whispered, “You don’t know, girl? Damon had a wife once, a long time ago. Our boats weren’t as good back then. It was on this very line that a boat capsized, and she was drowned.”

“A long time ago, you say? How long?”

“A very long time,” the Theiwar said. “Maybe forty years or more.”

“Yes,” she said, turning to look at Damon, who was heading for the nearest lift. “Yes, that is a long time.”

It was a quiet and subdued Willow Summercloud who followed Damon Omenborn ashore. She had never ridden a lift and almost fell when the stage she was on shot upward into the Life Tree. But someone caught her and steadied her. “Thank you,” she said, then turned to look into one of the most striking faces she had ever seen—a Hylar woman with streaks of silver in her long hair and wide-set, thoughtful eyes that seemed somehow familiar.

“These things take some getting used to,” the woman said. “My name is Tera Sharn.”

“Hello,” Willow said. “I’m Willow Summercloud. I ... this is the first time I’ve been to Thorbardin. I’m with someone, but he went ahead on another of these stages. He lives here, you know. His name is Damon. Damon Omenborn.”

“Of course,” Tera Sharn said. “I was in Daebardin when I heard Damon had returned. And you”—she looked Willow up and down, nodding her approval—“you came with him.”

“It really wasn’t his idea,” Willow admitted. “I think he’s been trying to get rid of me, but I can be pretty stubborn.” She looked around in confusion as the lift stage stopped at a higher level and started to step off, but the woman caught her arm.

“Not here,” she said. “Damon will be in the high levels. I’ll show you.”

“Thank you,” Willow said again. “I don’t want to lose him.”

“Even if he wants to lose you?”

“Oh, I don’t think he wants to lose me. Not really. He just doesn’t realize yet that he doesn’t, you see. Want to lose me, I mean. I mean, he hasn’t noticed yet, so I have to stay with him until he does. Notice. I mean, notice me.”

“Damon hasn’t noticed you?” Tera’s level eyes became even more thoughtful.

“Oh, he knows who I am. After all, I’ve followed him all over the wilderness and helped him defeat wizards, too. But he hasn’t

noticed *me*.” She glanced down, shaking her head. “That doesn’t make much sense, does it?”

“It makes perfectly good sense,” Tera Sharn assured her. “Damon can be a bit dense at times. He takes after his father in that respect.”

“You know him personally, then?”

“You might say so, dear. I’m his mother.”

“Oh!” Willow’s hand went to her mouth. “Oh, rust! I’m sorry. I mean, I shouldn’t have said all that about ... about him not noticing.”

“Why not? I expect it is very true.” The stage stopped again, and again, and finally reached a level where Tera Sharn stepped off, pulling Willow after her. “Come with me, dear,” she said. “Damon is probably just ahead there, with his father at our quarters. But we shall go in the other way and join them presently.”

Tera led the girl around a series of turns, into another corridor, and through a plain wood door which closed behind them. Beyond was an archway and the sound of male voices, but Tera pulled the girl through another door and began to rummage through trunks and drawers. One after another, she brought forth a beautiful, filigreed kilt, a blouse of elvenspin, stockings and soft boots, and a plaid weskit. Willow’s eyes widened at the rich textures, the subtle hues of the fabrics. She had never seen such beautiful clothing.

Tera Sharn pointed toward a wall-trough, with a basin and soft cloths below. “Wash up from your travels, dear,” she said. “These things are for you. You can change beyond that curtain.”

“For me?” Willow gaped at the woman. “Why?”

“Because underneath all that travel grime, you are a very pretty girl,” Tera said, “and it’s high time my son noticed you.”

Leaving the girl to change, Tera went into the main room and greeted her son, then stepped back, gazing up at him. “You’ve changed, Damon,” she said. “Something about you ...”

“He has had a run-in with wizards,” Willen Ironmaul said coldly. “The change you see is anger, and well he might be angry. What they were trying to do ...”

“They can’t do anything without this.” Damon held out a stone that seemed to be constantly changing colors—from clear to white

to shades of black to shades of red. "They have come to our land to build a place of sorcery. But without this, they can't build it."

"They will come for it then," Willen said. "They won't give up easily."

"We will have to stop them," Damon agreed. "But I have an idea about that."

"Our son is thinking about forging an agreement with a wizard," Willen explained. "He has one, more or less captive, outside the fortress. He thinks he can strike a bargain."

"I think this particular wizard would rather learn more about us than build a tower," Damon said. "I think we can bargain."

"You think he would help us, against his own kind?" Tera asked.

"Oh, not directly. But he can teach us things we need to know. About what magicians can do and how they think. I have learned more from him, just in a few moments of conversation, than he realizes. I will learn more. But this," he said, handing the stone to Willen Ironmaul, "must remain here. In Thorbardin. They must never get it back."

"I promise you they won't," Willen said, then his eyes widened as the portal behind Damon opened, and Willow stepped in. "Well, hello! And who is this?"

Damon turned and his mouth dropped open. For a moment all he could do was stare, then he managed, "W-Willow? Is that you?"

"It's the first time he has really noticed her," Tera Sharn told her husband, quietly.

"The first ..." Willen looked at Tera, then resumed his gaping at Willow. "By thunder! Has he been blind?"

Crooking a dainty finger, Tera led the regent of Thorbardin from the room. Willen looked back over his shoulder, at the two still standing in the other room, gazing at each other. "You had a hand in this, I'd say," he muttered to his wife.

"Of course I did. When a person meets his match, it's best that he realize it."



Sorcery and Stubbornness

“Magic is as real as the moons of Krynn,” Megistal insisted, pointing at the spangled sky framed by the towering walls of the Valley of the Thanes. “Magic depends upon the moons, in fact. There are three orientations of power, just as there are three moons. You dwarves *do* believe there are three moons, don’t you?”

“Of course we do. We have seen them.”

Damon Omenborn added fuel to the little fire between them and glanced aside at the big Cobar warrior, Quist Redfeather, who was roasting a pigeon on a spit. Beyond and some distance away was another fire where a dozen dwarven volunteers kept a respectful distance as they cooked their suppers. Damon and Tag had brought their humans to this place—the only part of Thorbardin exposed to the open sky—for a very good reason. With the fortified guardian halls that led to the subterranean roadways of Thorbardin blocked off, and even the great ventilator shaft closed and blocked from within, there was no way out of the Valley of the Thanes except straight up. Tag Salan had lowered a cable-ladder from above, the humans had followed Damon down to the valley floor where Damon’s dozen volunteers were waiting, then Tag had lifted the ladder away. The wizard might be able to levitate himself out of this place, but no human could simply climb out.

And Damon was fairly sure that neither of the humans would try to escape. They had their own reasons for staying.

Megistal’s fascination with dwarves and their stubborn resistance to magic was very real and very strong. The Cobar, on the other hand, had no personal interest at all in dwarves but had given

Damon his oath that he would help guard Megistal in exchange for a horse.

So now they sat at a fire on the floor of the Valley of the Thaness, and Quist Redfeather roasted pigeons while the wizard and the dwarf discussed magic.

"You have *not* seen three moons," Megistal argued. "You have seen two. The third one is ..."

"I know." Damon waved a dismissing hand. "It is black and cannot be seen. But we have sky-gazers, human. And we have the logic to realize that when a black spot crosses the sky on a regular basis, just as the moons do, then it, too, must be a moon. Yes, the moons are real. But magic isn't!"

The wizard's face creased in an exasperated frown. "How can you argue that magic doesn't exist, dwarf? You have seen it. You have felt it. Magic exists!"

"I didn't say it doesn't exist," Damon pointed out blandly. "I just said it isn't real. Have you ever looked into a mirror?"

"Of course I have!" Megistal snapped. "What of it?"

"What did you see there?"

"I saw myself."

"No, you didn't. You saw only an image. Do you think that was really you, on the other side of the mirror, looking back?"

"Of course not." Megistal sighed. "But what I saw was real."

"It was not. An image is not reality. It is only an image."

"A *real* image!"

"Like *real* magic," Damon mused, stifling a grin. "Just because one sees it, that doesn't mean it is there."

"Gods!" Megistal jumped to his feet, stamped around in a circle, then sat again. "You are so stubborn! What is it you're driving at?"

"You said you wanted to test magic on dwarves." Damon shrugged, helping himself to a bit of Quist's pigeon while the Cobar put another on to cook.

"Yes, I want to know why—and how—you managed to resist some very powerful spells," Megistal repeated. "But why all these questions?"

“A fair exchange,” Damon said. “I’ll help you learn about dwarves, and you tell me about magic. You can begin by telling me, what, exactly, is magic?”

Megistal scratched his head. “That’s difficult,” he said. “Like trying to describe red to someone who has always been blind.”

“Try,” Damon demanded.

“Well ... for instance, your barbarian friend there,” he said, indicating Quist.

“Barbarian?” Quist growled. “I am Cobar!”

“Cobar, then. But for example, it is possible that he could be not a human at all, but some other sort of creature. There is a reality for every possibility, and it is possible that in some other reality he is something else. Perhaps a wolf?”

“No. It isn’t.” Damon shook his head. “He isn’t a wolf. He’s a man.”

“Of course he is ... in *this* reality. But there are many realities, you see. Magic is the bridge that links them. In another reality, this man might be a wolf.” Casually, the wizard waved a finger and muttered an incantation. Suddenly, where Quist Redfeather squatted, plucking a pigeon, it seemed there was something else instead. A large canine form shimmered around him, feral eyes fixed on the wizard.

“Now, you see?” Megistal said. “Now he is a wolf.”

“No, he isn’t,” Damon said.

Megistal pointed at the vision by the fire. “Don’t you see him? Look! That is no man. That is a wolf!”

“I see a man,” Damon maintained. “There is an image of a wolf surrounding him, but he isn’t it.”

“How can you see a man there?” Megistal shouted. “I don’t see a man!”

“You see what you want to see,” Damon said. “I see what is there.”

With a fierce growl, the wolf-figure bunched its haunches to leap at the mage, and Megistal hissed, “*Kapach!*” It was no wolf that hit the wizard, but an angry Cobar warrior. The two rolled away from

the fire, spitting and thrashing, and Damon dived between them, separating them with strong, determined arms.

“That’s enough of that!” he growled.

The humans got to their feet, glaring at each other, and the dwarf stayed between them. “Enough!” he repeated. He pointed at the fire. “Both of you! Sit!”

Grudgingly, Quist Redfeather returned to his place, and Megistal followed. “You see?” he said. “He *was* a wolf.”

Damon turned to the Cobar. “Were you a wolf just then?”

“Yes,” Quist snapped. “And if he does that to me again, I’ll kill him.”

“Like I said”—Megistal spread his hands—“he actually *was* a wolf. That is magic.”

“He wasn’t a wolf,” the dwarf said stubbornly. “You and he both thought he was, but he wasn’t.”

“Gods!” Megistal snapped. “Then watch this, dwarf!” With an angry incantation, he folded his arms and rose a yard off the ground, then another yard, and another. When he was twenty feet above the fire he called, “Look at me, dwarf. Can you see me?”

“Very clearly,” Damon said.

“Where am I?”

Damon pointed at him. “Right up there.”

“Good! You see me where I am. Now how do you suppose I got up here?”

“Magic?”

“Exactly. Now we’re getting somewhere. You agree that I am up here in midair.”

“No, you’re not, really. You just think you are.”

Gently, Megistal lowered himself to the ground. “Stubbornness!” he muttered. “Sheer stubbornness.”

“Do you want to try another spell on me?” Damon asked.

“Do I have your permission?”

“As I promised.” The Hylar nodded. “But if it hurts too much I might have to kill you.”

“You will not!” Quist Redfeather growled. “When it comes to killing, the mage is mine.”

“Something mild, then,” Megistal agreed. “I’ll make you itch. That’s easy; I can do it with my eyes closed.”

“All right.” The dwarf stood, unslung his shield, and held it loosely beside him. “Make me itch with your eyes closed.”

Megistal closed his eyes, raised his hand, and muttered. Quickly, Damon raised his shield and turned it. Hidden within its curve was a fine Hylar mirror. The mage muttered his spell, pointing at the mirror, and Damon reversed the shield again, dropping it to his side where it had been.

“There.” Megistal opened his eyes. “Now, do you ... Ooooh!” His eyes widened, and he began scratching himself in a frenzy. “What ... What did you do?”

“I was just checking on something,” Damon said, smiling. “Interesting.”

Megistal was scratching so hard and so fast that it took him a moment to negate his spell. When it was gone, he sighed. The Cobar by the fire was choking with laughter.

“Well, let’s get on with it,” Damon said. “I have the volunteers I promised. You may try your spells on them, just so no one gets hurt without permission. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” Megistal nodded, still wondering how the dwarf had managed to turn his spell against him.

As the moons climbed into the night sky, illuminating the Valley of the Thanes with a soft luster, Megistal studied dwarves, and Damon studied Megistal.

The volunteers were mostly young dwarves, rash and adventurous enough to willingly endure the mild punishments and general unpleasantness of being subjected to magic. Among them, though, unknown to Megistal, were two Thorbardin notables. Damon had seen no reason to confide in the wizard that one of his test subjects was Barek Stone, the captain general of forces of Thorbardin, and another was Gem Bluesleeve, warden of the watch.

Hours passed in the moonlit valley as Megistal tried spell after spell on dwarf after dwarf, while Quist Redfeather watched in fascination and Damon Omenborn made suggestions.

At Megistal's utterance of the words, "*Hippochus bes. Chapak!*" Trip Sother, a long-armed Theiwar youth, was transformed—in the eyes of the two humans—into a gray horse. To the dwarves, it appeared as though the image of a horse had appeared, surrounding the Theiwar, but that Trip was still there. And when Trip turned and stepped away, the image faded. He was himself again.

"Fantastic!" Megistal muttered. "You, there! Tell me, were you a horse just then?"

Trip turned. "No, but I was inside one, and I didn't like it."

Clote Darkeye, a sturdy youth of dark Daergar descent, stepped forward and was levitated ten feet off the ground.

"Are you up in the air?" Megistal called.

"It seems like it," Clote answered. "But I can't be, so I'm probably not."

Megistal's pointing finger began to shake, and a sweat broke out on his brow. Despite the wizard's best effort, the dwarf began to descend.

"Stay up there!" Megistal demanded.

"I'm not up here," Clote called back, sinking lower and lower. "This isn't real."

"Can't you hold him up?" Damon inquired.

"He's getting very heavy," Megistal puffed. "But that's impossible. While under this spell, he shouldn't weigh anything."

Damon shrugged. "Clote Darkeye weighs a hundred and sixty pounds."

Abruptly, the Daergar dropped the last three feet, landing nimbly.

Megistal panted, shaking his head. "I don't understand," he said, as though to himself. He whirled, pointed at another volunteer, and muttered. The selected dwarf suddenly was covered with feathers. He resembled an unhappy owl.

"Look at him!" Megistal demanded. "What do you see?"

"He looks like he has feathers," Damon said.

"Do you have feathers?" the wizard demanded of the dwarf.

"No," that one assured him. "I've never had feathers. Right now I look like I do, but I don't."

"Gods!" Megistal snorted, shaking his head.

The dwarf who stepped forward then was older than most of the rest. He wore bright armor, and there were hints of silver in the dark beard below seamed cheeks and cold, wide-set eyes.

Before Megistal could begin a chant, the newcomer said, "Enough play, wizard. Kill me, if you can."

Megistal's brows raised, and he turned to Damon. "I gave you my word ..." he started.

"It's all right," the Hylar said. "Do as he says. Kill him, if you can."

"Are you sure?"

Damon looked up at the wizard, challenging him. "Are you?"

Megistal took a deep breath. "All right," he said. He muttered a spell, and a large, hurtling stone appeared above the armed dwarf, crashing down on him. He barely got his shield up in time to deflect it, and the impact knocked him to his knees. But the stone bounced away. The dwarf stood.

"No man could have stopped that," Megistal gasped. "That stone is the size of a water keg!"

The armored dwarf looked at his shield, studied its surface, and turned to whisper to a golden-bearded dwarf beside him. The gold-beard stepped forward. He tossed aside his shield and removed his body armor. "Try me," he demanded, glaring at the wizard. "Kill me, if you can."

"Kill him," Damon Omenborn said. "Kill him with a spell, if you can."

Megistal took a deep breath, focusing his powers, putting all of his will into the spell. This time it was not a stone, but a heavy bolt, as though from a siege engine. The three-inch-wide shaft with its four-edged metal point appeared out of nothing, hurtled toward the dwarf, and impaled him. He fell, gasping.

"There!" Megistal snapped. "Magic!"

For a moment, the impaled dwarf lay inert. Then he twitched, groaned, and sat up, struggling to pull the shaft from his body. The shaft became transparent as he tugged at it. It paled, shrank, and diminished, then was gone. The dwarf stood, pale and trembling, but very much alive.

“Are you all right, Gem?” Damon called.

“That hurt like all blazes,” Gem Bluesleeve assured the Hylar. “You were right about that, Damon. But I’m all right. There was really nothing there.”

Megistal gawked, at first one dwarf and then another. Quist Redfeather was staring at the recently impaled dwarf in absolute disbelief.

“If I had believed that was a real bolt, I’d be dead now,” Gem Bluesleeve told Barek Stone quietly.

“And if I had believed that stone was the size it looked, I’d have been crushed,” the captain general agreed. “But the stone wasn’t real. It shook me, though.”

Damon Omenborn faced the wizard, a deep curiosity in his narrowed eyes. Somehow, it had seemed to the dwarf that, at least the last two times, the wizard had held back. The spells had been potent spells and were delivered with force, but Damon had a feeling that something beyond spells had been withheld—something against which the dwarves might have had no defense. “Have you played enough games for now?” Damon asked. “Have you learned what you wanted to learn?”

“I have learned that it isn’t just you who can resist spells,” Megistal said. “It seems to be dwarves in general. And I have confirmed that the method of resistance is plain, stubborn refusal to believe. You don’t like magic, so you just ... just don’t allow for it in your concept of the universe. But I still don’t know how you do it. There must be some natural defense in your race. Magic is an absolute and is as certain as alternate realities.”

“There aren’t any alternate realities,” Damon said flatly.

“Gods,” Megistal muttered. “You’re about as open to suggestion as a chunk of basalt. Very well, I suppose I have learned as much as I can. Now, what do you want from me?”

“Oh, we already have what we want,” Damon told him. “Except for one thing. In magic, is the power in the person or in the spell itself?”

“I won’t tell you that,” Megistal said suspiciously. “I have probably revealed too much already.”

"I guess I must find out for myself, then." Damon shrugged. Pointing at Megistal, he said, "*Hippochus bes. Chapak!*"

The wizard's mouth dropped open ... and closed as a horse's mouth. Where Megistal had been, now there stood a red horse, shaking its head in confusion.

"The power is in the spell," Damon mused. "I thought so." To the horse, within which he still saw the mage, he said, "You're not really a horse, you know. You've never been a horse and never will be." He turned to Quist Redfeather. "I promised you a horse. Do you want this one?"

"How long will he remain a horse?" the Cobar asked, wide-eyed with wonder.

"I haven't any idea," Damon admitted. "Until the spell is reversed, I suppose. Or until he realizes that magic is no more than a bad habit. When he comes to that conclusion, he won't be a horse anymore. But then, he won't be a wizard anymore, either."

Quist walked around the red horse, looking it over. It was a fine, big horse, as sturdy and well formed as any he had seen. "I'll take this one," he said, turning, and found that he and the horse were alone. Somewhere, a gate closed with a heavy, metallic sound. The dwarves were gone. He ran toward where he had heard the sound and found only a stack of bales and water kegs. He looked around at the wide, deep little valley with its sheer vertical walls and muttered every curse of Cobar custom and a few from other tribes.

The dwarf had kept his word about a horse. Quist had a horse, if it didn't turn back into a wizard. But he was a prisoner here, in this valley, with no way out.

Intuition grew within him, and he ran back to the fireside where he had left his pack. He searched inside it. His credentials from the High Overlord and the missive to Daltigoth were gone. The dwarves had found them, then. They knew about his mission. And they had made him prisoner.

He turned over in his mind the odd thing Damon Omenborn had said to him: "If you help us with our problems, maybe we can help you with yours."

But what could they know of his problems? Of his family held hostage in Xak Tsaroth to ensure his return, of the cruelty of the High Overlord ...

Something nudged him from behind. The horse stood there, pressing its nose against his shoulder, wanting to be rubbed. He gazed at it thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "I, for one, believe in your magic even if I hate you for it. I saw you turn into a horse, and I don't care what that dwarf says, you are a real horse." Casually, he ran a strong hand along the animal's muzzle and rubbed a stiff ear. "That's all you are now," he said. "Just a horse."

* * * * *

Inside Thorbardin, Damon Omenborn, Barek Stone, and Gem Bluesleeve compared notes as they hurried toward the Grand Hall where the regent and the chieftains were waiting.

"We have learned that magic can hurt us," Gem Bluesleeve admitted. "It has great power."

"But its power is not absolute," Barek said. "I wonder if the wizards really understand magic themselves."

"They may not," Damon suggested. "I think that is why they want to build towers of sorcery. They have magic, but their skills are poor. They want to refine them."

"We have also learned that they—the other wizards—will come for their stone. They'll do everything they can to get it back."

"From what I've seen of wizards, they aren't very good at anything but magic."

"When the attack comes, it won't be by wizards alone," Barek told Damon. "Neidar rangers reported today that several large companies of human raiders have crossed into Kal-Thax. We don't know how they got past the border guards unchallenged, but I suspect the wizards had something to do with it. The Neidar say they are converging on a place southwest of here, where the wizards may be assembled."

"Well, we've learned something important that may help," Damon noted. "We learned that magic is in the words of the spells. It doesn't take a magician to work a spell, if the spell is known."

“You worked one,” Barek admitted. “I couldn’t believe you’d do that, but you did.”

“I hope I never need to again.” Damon wrinkled his nose. “It almost made me sick. What I’d like right now is a long hot bath.”



Fortress Thorbardin

There could be no further doubt, based on the Neidar reports, that Kal-Thax had been invaded and Thorbardin would be attacked. The fog-beast had not been seen since the day it murdered Mace Hammerstand and a hundred members of the Roving Guard on Sky's End, and there were some who said that it had gone away. But the greater threat, the wizards who had released it, remained, and they were determined to get back the thing the dwarves had taken from them—the Stone of Threes upon which the Tower of High Sorcery of Kal-Thax must be built.

For nine decades, the bonded thanes of Thorbardin had labored to create the mightiest of fortresses, deep in the heart of a mountain under Cloudseeker Peak. And now the fortress would be tested, with the fate of the entire race of dwarves at stake. If Thorbardin should fall, all of Kal-Thax would fall.

Under command of the regent, Willen Ironmaul, Thorbardin made ready for siege. Stores and supplies were laid in, defenders drilled in every cavern and corridor, and the great smelters surrounding the Shaft of Reorx roared with activity as Daergar iron and Theiwar fire-stone went into the making of steel to be fashioned into weapons. The metal-smithies were already geared to weaponry, having only recently completed a huge order of armaments for some buyer in the human realm of Ergoth—arms which, rumor said, were for a man named Darr Bolden. But now the forges went on double duty as every guardsman, soldier, and reservist in Thorbardin—and every civilian capable of bearing arms—was called to service.

Drums sang through the mountains, and patrols of Neidar scoured the nearby countryside escorting whole communities of unaffiliated

Einar dwarves to the safety of the great fortress. By the thousands they came, pouring in through the great portals of Southgate and Northgate, past the gateways where Southgate's plug sat ready to close and where Northgate's identical plug was being hurriedly installed upon its ram. Whole villages came up from the valleys and the fields, driving their herds and carrying their belongings, to disappear into the vast subterranean maze that was Thorbardin.

In Hybardin, Daebardin, Theibardin, Theibolden, and Daerbardin; in Northhole and Lakeshore; in the unnamed Klar city; and in every other established delving, hammers rang. Additional space was made for the refugees, and woodsmiths and weavers worked to erect large, temporary camps in the east and west farming warrens, which had been cleared of tractor worms. The worms, huge thirty-foot-long creatures with clusters of waving tentacles for faces, were in the back warrens, where Klar herdsman used them to clear new fields for planting.

Cambit Steelsheath, warden of ways, at first tried to count and record each person coming in from outside in an attempt to guard against infiltration by anyone who didn't belong. But the tide of refugees was so vast that his clerks found themselves overloaded, and surly crowds built up in the gateways. So he did it another way. At the entrance to each Anvil's Echo chamber, he had cables strung across the way at a height of five feet, five inches. Guards were posted at each side, with orders to stop anyone who had to stoop or duck to walk under the cables. No mature human or elf would pass such inspection, and no ogre of any age.

Beyond the fields of the Einar, other villages—those of the settled Neidar, whom most people now called hill dwarves—began moving inward toward the fortress, some to take shelter within and others to join their cousins, the Neidar Rangers, as the first line of defense.

Cale Greeneye had made it clear to the chief of chiefs that the fighting Neidar would remain outside, no matter what. "Thorbardin may be impenetrable," he said, "but what good is it if no one is left outside to defend?"

Willen Ironmaul was everywhere, it seemed, testing defenses, reviewing troops, and meeting with thane leaders and wardens.

Followed by Cable Graypath and the Ten, the Hylar regent was constantly on the move throughout Thorbardin.

Barek Stone, captain general of forces, studied plans and strategies with his commanders, always keeping in mind that two defenses would be required if the wizards and their “allies”—increasing hordes of human mercenaries brought in from the outlands of Ergoth and the wild lands beyond—pressed an attack beyond the outer slopes. Thorbardin was constructed for defense but had never been tested in true conflict. And in addition to the threat of troops and armies, it must now face the barely understood forces of sorcery.

Gem Bluesleeve, warden of the watch, reviewed all of his forces and then put direct command in the hands of another Daewar, Lodar Yellowkilt, captain of court guards. Gem had another task for himself, and to accomplish it he commandeered a hundred of the best Daewar delvers, a hundred select Theiwar volunteers—all of whom had served as boatmen on the Urkhan Sea—and a troop of Vog Ironface’s best mine sappers, all draped from head to toe in heat-resistant spunstone fabric created by the weavers of Daebardin from fibers collected by the Klar. In addition, he put a dozen Hylar glaziers to work, blowing large glass globes with foot-wide openings at one end and sockets for shoulder straps.

Part of the task began in the Shaft of Reorx, just above the smelter vents, where the heat-exchange ducts fed outward to the various cities. Here the Daergar sappers, with masks and thick, protective spunstone wraps, were put to work setting a hinged iron cap over the abandoned duct that had been begun years ago to feed heat to Hybardin, before a better way was found.

The other part of the task was miles away, three hundred yards out from the south shore of the Urkhan Sea. A dozen boats congregated there on the bright water, tethered together like a little floating island. Beneath each boat were climb-lines, long cables with stone weights that rested on the bottom.

Daewar delvers, sullen and nervous, were gathered on the boats, outfitted with lead-soled boots and tool straps. A glass globe was placed over the head of each one, with straps beneath his armpits. A

towline was attached to each belt, and the delvers were lowered over the side in groups of ten by grinning, joking Theiwar boatmen.

Each delver sank to the bottom of the sea, worked furiously there for eight minutes, then was raised from the water, given a chance to breathe fresh air, and lowered again. It was probably the worst experience of the delvers' lives—trying to dig a hole underwater while living on the air contained in a fragile glass bowl, and, worst of all, being completely dependent upon a bunch of “tarnish-happy Theiwar” to bring them up before they drowned. It was doubtful that any of them would have even tried it, except for their respect for Gem Bluestone—not to mention the rich reward Olim Goldbuckle promised to each one who survived.

So, while mine-sappers capped the old heat-exchange tunnel in the Shaft of Reorx, delvers were at work at the other end, digging toward the same duct to flood it with water.

It was Willen Ironmaul, as regent, who had approved the project. Now, as he watched the diving delvers descending from their boats, the regent sighed and turned to Gem Bluestone. “Let us pray to all the gods who matter, Gem,” he said, “that this contrivance works properly ... should we need it. Because if it doesn't, I imagine the Council of Thanes will draw and quarter one ex-regent and one excellent soldier who have wild ideas.”

With all these intense preparations underway, Willow Summercloud was left with little to do but watch as Fortress Thorbardin came to life around her. Damon Omenborn had refused to let her accompany him on his wizard-study expedition, and since his return he was so busy, being involved in all sorts of preparations, that she hardly saw him at all.

At first, Willow tagged around after Tera Sharn, learning the ways of Thorbardin. Then, when Tera became involved in a “ladies' home defense plan,” Willow wandered around by herself, exploring the huge subterranean realm that—she had decided—was going to be her home, if she could just capture Damon's attention a few more times.

Dressed in the fine, practical garb Tera had shown her how to wear, but still carrying her woodsman's axe wherever she went, the

Einar girl wandered about, marveling at the wonders of Thorbardin. The controlled daylight of the sun-tunnels fascinated her, as did the nighttime splendor of the Temple of Stars above the Shaft of Reorx. She rode the lifts and cable-carts, wandered the public ways, and explored the galleries with their myriad shops and stalls. She watched the crafters at work, with their forges, looms, shuttles, and lathes. She saw the gloomy corridors of Daerbardin, the quiet, dim passages of Theibardin, and the bright, many-colored concourses of Daebardin. And more than once, she found herself fending off groups of young male dwarves vying for her attention.

She was fascinated by the great farming warrens—miles of subterranean fields and vine-covered ledges where the thanes had learned to grow a hundred kinds of useful crops. But the east and west warrens were packed by refugees camping at their entrances, so she headed for the old north warren beyond Theibardin. It was there, they said, that the first farming had been done. It had been called the first warren then, and most of the experiments with subterranean agriculture applied in the newer warrens had been done there. But the north warren itself had only recently been made ready for farms of its own.

She was on her way there, walking through the lake-front bazaar of Daebardin, when a high musical voice hailed her from behind.

“Hello, there!” Shillitec Medina Quickfoot trilled. “I’ve been hoping I’d find somebody I knew! Wow, isn’t this the strangest place you ever saw? I’ve been trying to see it all, but I’ve only seen a little of it so far.”

“What are you doing here?” Willow demanded, glaring at the tiny, slender being with the great mop of hair. “You aren’t supposed to be in Thorbardin. Thorbardin is for dwarves only.”

“Is that right?” The kender girl giggled. “Well, I guess it’s all right, though, because nobody told me to stay out when I got here.”

“How did you get in?”

“I just walked in, like everybody else was doing. There was this big gate, with dwarves everywhere looking very fierce and solemn, and just all sorts of dwarves going through it, so I went through it, too. They had a cable strung up, about this high.” She stretched on

tiptoes and raised a hand as high as she could. "And after you walked under the cable you were in. Nothing to it. Did you have to walk under a cable?"

"But surely somebody has noticed you since then." Willow frowned. "Surely somebody told you to leave?"

"Oh, sure," Shill giggled. "They told me to leave at that nice bread-and-hot-meat place where I had lunch, and they told me to leave at some big, hot place where everybody was sweating and making an awful lot of noise with hammers. And, of course, there was that unfriendly dwarf with all the pretty things spread out on his table. He shouted at me. But then, I've never minded being shouted at. Have you?"

"What kind of pretty things?"

"Oh, things like this." Shill reached into a belt-pouch and brought forth a dazzling necklace of bright jewels set in gold filigree. "All kinds of pretty things."

"No wonder he shouted," Willow muttered.

"Oh, I didn't steal it. It was just lying on the floor. I guess somebody dropped it or something. Where are we going?"

"I'm going to look at a farming warren. I don't know where you're going."

"That's all right. I'll just go with you."

"And what makes you think I'd want to be seen here—in Thorbardin—in the company of a ... a *kender*?"

"Don't worry," Shill assured her. "If anyone objects, I'll vouch for you. I'll just tell them you're my dwarf."

Seeming to have no choice in the matter, Willow resumed her journey with Shill chattering along after her. As it happened, though they passed crowds of busy dwarves at every bend and interval, the creature following her attracted no more than casual, curious glances. After a time she decided that no one expected to see a kender in Thorbardin, so no one actually recognized one. And the exuberant kender—with her layers of motley-colored clothing and her various, bulging pockets and pouches—might have seemed at a glance to be just a talkative and undernourished dwarven child with far too much hair.

For her part, Shill was taking it all in, thoroughly enjoying the excursion. Bright eyes that missed very little were constantly on the move, seeing everything there was to see. A group of Klar came toward them, carrying cudgels and day packs. Willow stepped aside to let them pass, but Shill scampered right through the group, gawking at their thick-muscled arms, their wild bushy hair, sparse beards, and close-set eyes. As the kender passed, ducking beneath an elbow here, dodging fur-booted feet there, a few of the Klar turned to look back.

“What was that?” one asked.

“Who knows?” another said. “Somebody’s cub.”

“Funny-lookin’ cub,” the first one noted, shrugging.

Willow had an impulse to ask the Klar if she was on the right road to the north warren, but she kept her silence. The Klar were strange people. Usually affable enough, and sometimes quite friendly, they were noted for their erratic nature. A friendly Klar, she had heard, could abruptly become angry and dangerous for no particular reason. Many among the other thanes avoided the Klar entirely.

Still, Tera Sharn had told her, the Klar were—as a group—intensely loyal to Thorbardin and its leaders. And they were the most skilled of all the thanes at the task of creating arable fields underground. They seemed to have an uncanny ability to herd and manipulate the huge tractor worms that pulled the graders and plows, turned the stonecrushers, and hauled the topsoil for the warrens. Big, strong, and stupid, the giant worms were a fine resource in the warrens. But very few of anythane but Klar could really control them. And a worm out of control could be deadly, as the dwarves had learned a long time ago.

Shill caught up with Willow, chatting now about Klar, and the dwarf girl glanced around as light reflected from something bright. The kender was holding a little silver vial, looking at it curiously.

“What is that?” Willow pointed.

“I don’t know,” Shill said. “I found it somewhere. Look, it has a lid.”

Without waiting for comment, the kender unscrewed the top of the vial and peered into it. “It’s silver inside, too,” she said. She

tipped the container and a large drop of bright, metallic liquid fell from it. Where it spread, on the tunnel's floor, it was as bright as a new mirror. "Pretty," Shill said.

Crouching, Willow touched the liquid metal with a tentative finger and sniffed it. Her eyes narrowed, and she backed away, frowning. "Tamex!" she spat. "Tamex, the false metal. Get rid of that! It's poison!"

"It is?" Shill shrugged. "I think it's kind of pretty. Look, I'll pour some in my hand and ..."

A strong hand shot out, slapping the vial from the kender's tiny fingers. It clattered against a wall, trailing bright mercury.

Shill stared at the thrown vial, then at her slapped hand, then up at Willow's furious face, and a tear formed at the corner of her eye. "You didn't have to do that," she said thinly.

"No, I didn't," Willow snapped. "I could have just let you play with that stuff, and maybe get sick from it or go crazy or whatever tamex does to people. Where did you get that, anyway?"

"Back there," the little kender pointed, stifling a sob. "Where those Klar people were. Maybe one of them lost it or something."

Willow stared back the way they had come, remembering something she had heard about the Klar. Some of them, it was said, traded in quicksilver. A coating of the false metal could make a corroded tool seem bright and new, at least long enough to deceive an unwary buyer. Dealing in the false metal was a serious crime in Thorbardin. Many an unwary dwarf had been poisoned by contact with tamex.

Willow shuddered, suddenly very glad that she had not stopped to speak to those particular Klar.

Shill was sniffing, and Willow knelt before her. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was frightened. I didn't mean to hurt you."

The north warren was huge, a natural cavern a mile wide in some places and nearly three miles in length. The light here was subdued, coming from a few scattered sun-tunnels and several wide, slanted strata of natural quartz leading upward to the high slopes of the mountain. Far off to the right, as the two entered, they could see herdsmen working with thirty-foot-long tractor worms, building

topsoil on a newly leveled field. A distant wall separated the back warren from the main warren. The kender tried to scamper off in that direction, but Willow still had hold of her hand.

Dragging the reluctant kender after her, Willow headed northward. In the distance there were fields already completed and planted. Above them, on the walls of the cavern, great terraces stood, bearing fruit vines and climbing plants of many varieties. The closer they approached, it seemed to Willow, the sweeter the air smelled—almost like the breezes across the fields back home. She shook her head, trying not to think about Windhollow. Remembering her life there led to remembering what had happened there, and the memory was extremely painful.

With Shill tagging after her, she wandered among the fields, marveling. These were not Einar crops. Some things, like grains and fine fibers, would not grow underground. But those things that would, the bonded thanes had planted. Just in this one warren there were food sources for thousands of people. Combined with the grains, melons, fibers, timber, and sun-greens that Thorbardin received in trade from those outside, there was sustenance here for an entire race.

At a stone wall at the northern end of the cavern, where a dozen varieties of spices, herbs, and aromatics were growing, Willow stopped to breathe deeply of the rich smells and noticed suddenly that the air had turned colder.

At her side, the kender girl pointed. “Look!” she said. “Vapors.”

Almost hidden behind a screen of green vinery, there was some kind of stone seal. It looked as though a very large tunnel had been sealed off a long time ago. But here and there, around the edges of the placed stone, little mists floated outward through the vines.

Willow approached, stooped, and peered. The mists were only vague wisps of vapor seeping through ancient stone cracks, but they were cold. Cold as winter winds, she thought. As cold ... as cold as the fogs in which the beast had swathed itself back at Windhollow.

Then there was the distant sound of drums, echoing through the cavern. In the fields around, people stopped to listen, then picked up their tools and hurried toward the main tunnel almost a mile away.

“What is it?” Willow asked a passing Theiwar farmer. “What do the drums say?”

“Call to arms,” the dwarf growled. “We’re under attack!”



16

The Enemy

It was a group of Daergar miners, just leaving their digs in Late evening, who discovered the invasion rift. More than a hundred in number, they had been sampling ore in the maze of shafts beneath Thunder Peaks, south of the Promontory below Cloudseeker, for several weeks. Now they had their inventory and were on their way north to report to Vog Ironface in Thorbardin. They came out of the shafts late in the day, as dusk settled over the mountain lands, and most did not put on their slit-masks. The evening light was diffused and pleasant, and the breezes were those of greening spring.

Carrying their picks, hammers, and miners' shields, some wearing their conical stone-fall helmets and others slinging them on straps, they made their way northward as the long southern evening deepened toward nightfall. It was a three-day journey to Southgate, and, as Daergar, they preferred to travel at night and rest by day.

They had gone four miles when their leader, Sledge Veinseek, reached the long curving ledge where the mine trail wound toward the placer camps on Ice Creek, and stopped in confusion. From the ledge, a great panorama spread northward, a view that included everything for nearly a hundred miles. From here most of the upper Promontory was visible, and beyond it the slopes of giant Cloudseeker, rising away in the distance toward its crown of three crags—the Windweavers.

Every Daergar miner had seen the mighty view hundreds of times, coming and going between the dig-shafts above and the placer camps below. But now the view was somehow different, and the Daergar crowded around Sledge Veinseek in puzzlement.

“There!” One of them pointed northward. “That forested ridge, running east and west ... I don’t remember a ridge there.”

“There isn’t any ridge there,” another agreed. “At least, there wasn’t the last time I passed here. There is a little canyon there, not a ridge.”

“You’re right,” Sledge said. “Down there is where the main trace crosses the canyon. At least, it used to. But the main trace just ends now. It runs to that ridge and stops.”

Pyrr Steelpick pushed forward, shouldering others aside. The boss of shafts was a grizzled, time-weathered dwarf with massive forearms and a stubborn streak just as large. Now he stepped up beside Sledge Veinseek and stared out across the near miles. “What’s a ridge doing there?” he rumbled. “There’s nothing like that there, where that is.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Sledge agreed. “But there seems to be a ridge there now.”

Puzzled and wary, the miners trekked on down the winding trail to the placer camps, then turned northward on the main trail to Thorbardin. Here in the little valley of Ice Creek rising slopes blocked their view of the lands northward, but the trail climbed away—as it always had—toward the Promontory and the fortress mountain beyond.

They had gone several miles by the time they came out of Cutpass onto the downward slopes where the trail led—or should have led—across an interval of canyons and gullies where the wide, sloping meadow called the Promontory began. But now the trail led to no canyons or cuts. Instead it ran to the slope of a high forest-capped ridge and stopped.

More puzzled by the moment, the Daergar approached the strange formation, staring at it in bewilderment. Evening had turned to full night, but to Daergar eyes the light of the stars was enough.

At the beginning of the surprising slope, the trail simply ended.

“I don’t believe it,” Pyrr Steelpick growled. “Somebody is playing tricks. There is no ridge here. There never was.”

Sledge Veinseek walked to the end of the trail and took another step. The ground on the slope felt slightly resilient, but it supported

him. "Come on," he said. "We'll climb it and see what the other side looks like."

"I don't intend to climb any ridge that isn't there," Pyrr announced. "There is a trail here, crossing a canyon. There has always been a trail and a canyon, and I have always walked the trail and crossed the canyon. I don't intend to change my ways now."

With a fierce frown, the shaft boss stepped off the end of the trail, and his foot sank to the knee in the stony slope. He took another step and was waist-deep in what seemed to be solid hillside. "I told you," he said, glancing up at Sledge, who stood on the slope above him. "There isn't any ridge here." With grim determination, the stubborn shaft boss pushed on, disappearing into the hillside which seemed to close behind him as though no one had been there.

Watching him go, Sledge felt his own feet sinking into the yielding surface. Suddenly he was standing on solid ground, and the "hillside" engulfed him to the neck. "Pyrr is right!" he said. "This isn't a real ridge."

"Then what is it?" someone asked.

"I don't know," Sledge admitted. He stepped forward, and the hillside surrounded him. He felt as though he were immersed in jelly and could barely see his own raised hand. At each movement, the "hill" resisted him, then yielded. But he could breathe freely, and despite the resistance of whatever he was in, he could still move. He backed up until his head and shoulders were in the clear and looked at the exposed parts of himself. Nothing clung to him. Whatever it was, it was not sticky or fluid. He leaned to taste the surface before him. It had no taste. It was as though there were nothing there.

"Come on," he told those behind him. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

Several of them hesitated. "That's one way to put it," someone commented. But others plunged forward, following their leader. Confusion followed. Some of them walked directly into the slope, as Pyrr and Sledge had, but others found themselves moving upward, climbing a hill.

Below them, Sledge snapped, "You, up there! Come down here!"

“How?” one asked. “This is a hillside.”

“Which are you going to believe, your eyes or me?” Sledge demanded. “This is *not* a hillside. Now come on!”

Most of those on the slope dropped out of sight, and the company disappeared into the ridge, all except six young Daergar who simply couldn't seem to sink. They had their leader's assurance that there was no hill, but the fact was, they were standing on it. With nothing else to do, the six kept climbing, heading for the top, hoping to meet the rest of their party on the other side.

Inside the strange ridge, Sledge groped blindly forward until he came up to Pyrr Steelpick, who had stopped. “What is it, Pyrr?” he asked. His voice sounded muted and soft in the thick gloom.

“Look,” Pyrr said. “Just ahead. Lights.”

Sledge squinted and saw what the shaft boss had first noticed. Ahead, seeming near, a line of yellowish glows swam by one after another, sometimes in groups of five or ten, and sometimes so closely packed that it might have been made up of many small glows or one big one. The glows were all moving from right to left, coming into view from what Sledge assumed was still the east, and fading toward the west.

Pushing past Pyrr, the Daergar mine commander crept closer to the line of passing lights and observed that they became more clearly defined as he approached. They looked like torches. He moved forward again and saw dim figures trotting past—or the heads and shoulders of figures. Like tall people moving along in a trench, only their upper parts were visible. He crept closer still, and gasped. The lights *were* torches, torches carried by armed humans, passing just ahead of him.

As he took another step, the last torch passed, and darkness descended. Sledge pushed on and suddenly found himself beyond the eerie, heavy murk. He was standing at the rim of a little gully, inside what seemed to be a wide tunnel of solid stone. He looked to his left and saw the last of a large party of armed men trotting away around a bend. Their torches cast eerie shadows on the tunnel's walls.

Just behind him, Pyrr Steelpick stepped out of what seemed a solid stone wall, and others appeared, crowding around, gaping at the long tunnel that seemed to run through the bottom of a ridge that was not a ridge.

“What is this?” a sapper demanded. “Is this magic?”

“It might be,” Sledge said. “I’ve never seen magic, but this sure looks like it.”

From down the tunnel came the sounds of voices and trotting feet, and torchlight glinted on the stone. Another band of armed humans came around a bend and skidded to a halt as the light of torches fell on the mob of Daergar spreading across the way.

“Dwarves!” a human voice shouted.

An arrow hummed along the corridor and buried itself in the throat of a miner. The dwarf fell, thrashing in death, and two more pitched backward as they were hit, one by an arrow and one by a thrown hand-dart.

Sledge raised his miner’s shield and shouted, “Defend!” In an instant, every standing dwarf had dropped to his knees, with his shield before him. A barrage of arrows, darts, and bolts from the human band whisked over them or clanged against shields.

“Attack!” Sledge ordered. The dwarves came to their feet, closing ranks even as they charged into the ditch, becoming a short, solid wall of raised shields and running feet. The first line of Daergar hit the humans, and men went down, shrieking and tumbling as hammers, picks, and iron chisels smashed at them. Even as they fell, those still standing among them pitched forward as stone-drills flicked from between shields to shatter knees and pierce thighs. Thirty or more humans fell within seconds, and the first line of Daergar washed over them, then parted, swinging aside in disciplined lines as a second wave of dwarves flooded through to attack the humans beyond. Here and there a Daergar fell to a lucky blow, but far more humans went down than dwarves.

“The torches!” Sledge ordered.

Lines of dwarves swarmed past the melee, clambering up the sides of the little gully, and ran along the line of humans still pushing forward. Delving axes lashed out, and torches flew from human

hands as dwarves scrambled in the confusion to extinguish them with their shields. Within seconds, the entire section of tunnel was dark.

In the darkness, the Daergar went to work with murderous efficiency. A vague glow here and there was all the light their miners' eyes required.

It was a massacre. Those humans who tried to hold their position were cut down, and those who tried to run were caught and killed. When silence returned, Sledge called, "Regroup!" The Daergar gathered around him, blood-soaked and sweating from exertion. There had been more than a hundred of them. There were still more than eighty, and for each fallen dwarf there were at least ten slaughtered human invaders. With the torches gone, the humans had not stood a chance. What was darkness to human eyes—and to most dwarves—was fighting light to a Daergar.

"Who were they?" Pyrr rumbled, wiping gore from his heavy pick. "What are humans doing here, and why did they attack us?"

"Ask this one," a miner said. Several grim Daergar led forward a battered human, the only survivor. Sledge recognized the appearance and attire of the marauders called Sackmen, nomads from the northern deserts who had sometimes tried to make their way into the dwarven lands. The man was bloody and disarmed, though the odd, curved basket with which the Sackmen threw their deadly hand-darts was still strapped to his right wrist.

"Only one left alive," a miner growled, prodding the man forward with his pick handle.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Sledge demanded of the man.

The man sneered, shaking his head. Without hesitation, Pyrr Steelpick stepped forward and crouched in front of the human, loosing his heavy hammer and digging a long rock-spike from his pouch. "I'll nail his feet to the ground," he told Sledge. "Humans talk better that way."

Several dwarves seized the man's legs, holding him motionless, and the burly shaft boss set the point of his spike atop a large foot and raised his hammer.

“Wait!” the man squealed. “Wait, I’ll tell you. We came ... We were hired to fight for some wizards.”

“Fight against whom?” Sledge asked.

“Against ...”—the man swallowed—“against dwarves.”

Pyrr raised his hammer again.

“Wait!” the man wailed. “It’s nothing personal! We ... They’ve hired a lot of people. It’s just business.”

“Hired you with what?” Sledge asked.

“Coin,” the man said. “In ... in my pouch.”

Dwarven hands removed the pouch from the man’s belt and dumped the contents out. A handful of bright coins fell on the ground. A miner picked one of them up, frowned at it, and tasted it. “Rock,” he muttered. “It sort of looks like a coin, but it’s only a little rock.”

“How many of you are there?” Sledge asked, then raised a hand. Human voices sounded somewhere in the tunnel. “Get him out of here,” Sledge ordered.

Without hesitating, Pyrr Steelpick grabbed the man’s arm in powerful fingers. Others grabbed his other arm, and the man was propelled up the bank and toward the wall. The dwarves, running at full speed, hit the stone and disappeared within it. The man screamed, smashed against the stone, and bounced off, flipping and rolling to the edge of the gully. Where he had rebounded, heads popped out of the blood-splattered “stone.”

“Whoops,” Pyrr said.

Sledge squatted beside the man. He was dead. Nearby, a dwarf stooped and picked up a small stone. “Rock,” he said. “Doesn’t even look like a coin now.”

“I think we had better tell Vog Ironface about this,” Sledge decided.

Down the tunnel, more glows indicated that more human invaders were approaching. Turning, Sledge climbed what he hoped was the north side of the little gully and walked directly into the stone wall of the tunnel. “There isn’t any tunnel here,” he reminded himself. He stepped into the stone and disappeared. Behind him, the others followed a few at a time. The last of them were still climbing from

the gully when another band of mercenaries rounded the near bend and found themselves wading through, and stumbling over, the bodies of the dead. Those in the lead, holding torches high, spotted the last few Daergar still in the “tunnel” and sprinted toward them, blades drawn.

Chink Deepshaft, a young sapper, was the last Daergar to reach the gully bank, and several big humans were at his heels as he raced full-tilt into the wall. He dived for the apparently solid stone and rolled through it. Behind him, blades clanged against solid rock, and a pair of Sackmen warriors bounced off the stone.

Beyond the ridge, the group of Daergar emerged into normal night and gazed at the Promontory spreading ahead of them with Cloudseeker rising beyond it.

As they emerged, five shamefaced young miners scurried down the slope of the ridge that wasn’t a ridge and joined them, gawking at the blood-smeared apparel and gore-stained tools of those who had gone through and survived.

“That’s what you get for doubting your own logic,” Pyrr Steelpick snapped at them. “You knew there wasn’t a ridge here, but you believed there was, so you missed all the fun.”

“Let that be a lesson to you,” Sledge added. “If you know a thing is so, it’s so. If you know it’s not, it’s not. Otherwise you’re no better than humans.”

* * * * *

When the first wave of human mercenaries came down the long meadows from the west, making for the ways below Southgate, drums sang the warning and dwarves were ready to meet them. Twelve “hundreds” of fighting Holgar—four mounted companies and eight foot companies—emerged from the mountain fortress at Southgate and marched with parade precision down the twin, slanting ramparts of the gate approaches to take up positions at intervals above the north swales of the Promontory.

Some of the fighting units were tribal—three of the four mounted units were almost entirely Hylar, two foot units were Theiwar, and one, the legendary Golden Hammer assault force, was entirely

Daewar. The rest, though, were mixed companies of Hylar, Daewar, Theiwar, Daergar, and even a few Klar.

With quick precision, the companies moved into assigned positions: along the exposed flank of Cloudseeker's south face, in the rock formations near the Valley of the Thanes, in the broken-cliff canyons of the old Theiwar raiding grounds, behind the bastions at the foot of each gateway road, on the forested slope overlooking the Daergar ore pits, and out on the Promontory itself. The line of defense was a bowed, reinforced arc of foot troops, with fast-moving attack squadrons at each end, and armored cavalry at the wings and point.

Barek Stone, placing the units, made no attempt to conceal their strength. A veteran of many battles, the captain general knew that just the sight of armed dwarves, ready to fight in formation, was enough to awe most human warriors.

So Barek let the humans see what they were up against—or, at least, the first line of defense. What they didn't see was the special equipment carried by some of the defenders and what lay behind the first line. Within many of the shields carried by defenders were mirrors. Hidden along most of the trails and paths leading from the Promontory to the slopes were companies of ambushers with nets and cables, deadfalls and pendulums, spring-spikes and brush-balls. In the rocks above each wing of the defense line were companies of slingers, with woven leather slings and supplies of iron balls.

And along each walled way leading up to Southgate, hidden by the guard towers which stood at intervals there, were the engines of defense from the crafteries within Thorbardin: huge, winch-drawn bows that could hurl a thick, ten-foot spear three hundred yards and batteries of drawn catapults armed with everything from stones and dagger blades to brass containers full of Pack Lodestone's awful concoctions. And behind the highest outposts were two huge towering engines that humans had never seen because the dwarves had never shown or used them. They were a recent development of the crafteries—side-arm discobels that could sling saw-edged iron disks with enough force to knock down large trees.

These were the outer defenses of Thorbardin—those that were in plain view and those that were not.

The first sightings had been of a thousand or more human marauders coming across the Promontory from somewhere near its head to the southwest. But now, as the sun of Krynn rose high, the drums spoke of other thousands coming into view. The line of grim, marching warriors seemed to double and double again as it came into sight, spreading across the high meadow. The men had been bunched, but now as they spread and formed into separate groups, they seemed to fill half the Promontory. Atop the sentinel peaks, sharp eyes estimated counts and drums spoke. Seven thousand, they said. Ten companies, spreading and approaching, each company averaging seven hundred armed and battle-hardened human warriors.

On the walled ledge outside Southgate, Willen Ironmaul stood, backed by the Ten. He heard the count and frowned. The outside defenders, the field companies, numbered one thousand, two hundred dwarves. “Six to one,” the chief of chiefs muttered. “Well, we have some surprises to help offset that.”

But then, abruptly, the drums on the mountains sang a new song, and every dwarven eye turned to the meadowlands.

There was not one human army, but two! No, three! Coming onto the Promontory from the south and east were more masses of humans, marching hordes spreading and forming into fighting companies. And each army was the equal of the first.

Three assaults! The drums sang of it. Not seven thousand invaders, but three sevens of thousands!

And above Thorbardin, in the high outposts below Galefang, other drums joined the tattoo. Willen turned, shading his eyes. From due west, just coming around the steeps above the meadows, was still another army, a *fourth* army as large as the other three.

* * * * *

Hurrying along the catwalk through Anvil’s Echo, Damon Omenborn scanned its massive defenses: the precarious suspended bridge with nothing around it except thin air and murder holes, and

at its outward end the gateway, with its massive plug ready to rumble into place. It seemed inconceivable that any attacking force could reach Southgate, much less get through it. But, should that ever happen, here was the last and best line of defense.

Past Anvil's Echo, Damon heard the sentinel drums, and his jaws clenched. So many invaders? Four armies? How could there be so many? Why had the wizards brought so many troops?

He ran through Gateway, outpacing his fifty volunteers, and scurried around the plug-housing to emerge on the walled ledge where his father and the Ten surveyed the lands beyond. At the wall, Damon looked out at the Promontory and felt his breath go ragged. He had never seen so many humans. He had never seen so many of *anybody*!

The first army, from the southwest, was halfway across the Promontory now, a huge, marching rank of grim warriors, sweeping forward along a wide front.

And to right and left, the other armies were approaching. Identical armies. Identical in number, identical in formation ... His eyes narrowed as he picked out a horseman in the fore of the assault from the east. A fur-cloaked, helmeted man on a spotted horse, just like ...

Damon's eyes swung to the right. There, at the fore of the first group, was an identical horseman, fur cloak, spotted horse, and all. Damon clapped his father's steel-plated back and pointed. "Look!"

The army from the south was just crossing the staging areas, far out on the Promontory. The distance was greater, but there, too, was a fur-cloaked man on a spotted horse.

"They are images!" Damon growled. "Magic! One army has become many!"

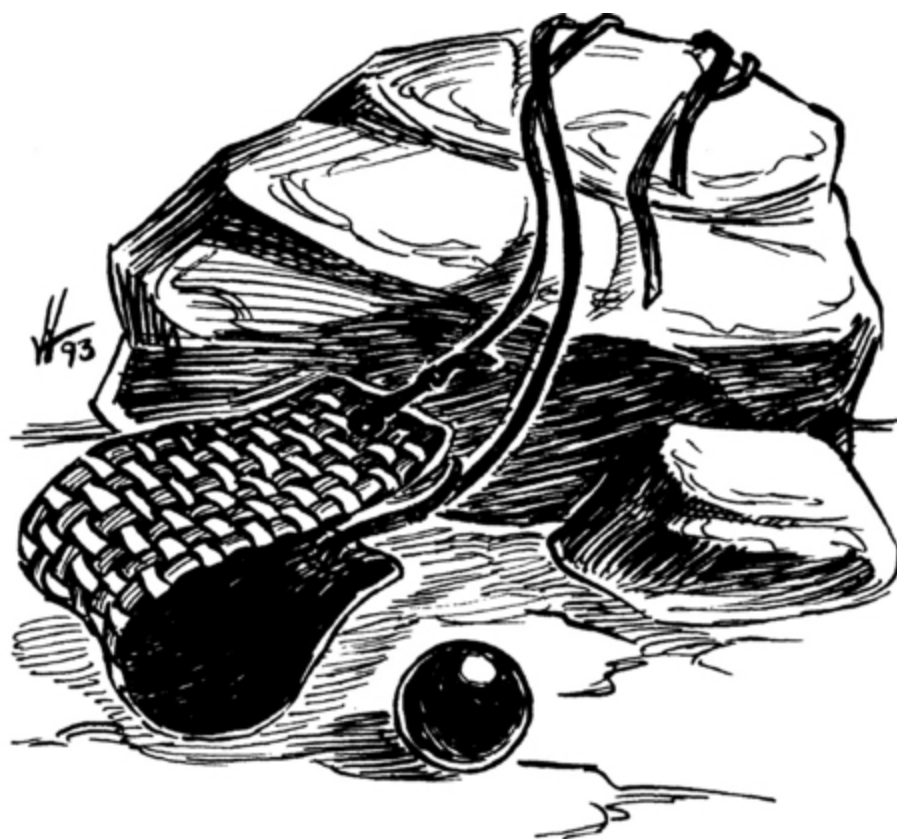
"Magic?" Willen Ironmaul squinted, peering out across the distance. "They aren't real, then? Do you mean they can't hurt us?" At the staging area—a collection of low sheds and walled pits where trade caravans assembled in season—something was happening. A pair of dwarves had appeared there, gold-bearded Daewar goods-tenders popping out of a shed to flee toward Southgate. The humans saw them, and a dozen horsemen thundered through the foot-lines

after them. In a moment, the dwarves were down, felled by slashing blades. Even at this distance, those on the walled ledge could see the crimson of their blood.

Drums muttered, and they looked westward. Just beyond the rock formations below the Valley of the Thanes, a small group of Einar had bolted from hiding, directly into the path of the fourth army of humans. Tall warriors rushed to attack, and the dwarves tried to defend. A human fell, and then another. But it was over in a moment. Methodically, the marauders cut down the little group of dwarves and came on.

“They seem real enough,” Willen growled. “They kill like real people.”

“There is only one army,” Damon said flatly. “But we don’t know which one it is. Until we do, they might as well all be real.”



The Bloody Fields of Southgate

By sheer cunning—with the help of a pair of spells that had sent the white-coat leader Valneb to a place where his spells would fail until he could learn to say them backward and had turned the red-tunic Gilmar into a copper pot—the dark wizard Kistilan had taken control of the representatives of magic in the Kharolis mountains ... just as he had intended to do from the day he left Xak Tsaroth. The two rival leaders would return eventually, he knew. Valneb would manage to reverse a return spell, and Gilmar would contrive to boil over and quench the fire beneath him. But Kistilan knew he could deal with them. In all these lands, only two remained of the wizards who were “favored of the powers”—himself and Megistal. And Megistal had disappeared.

To the rest of them, Kistilan had spelled out his terms. “When the dwarves are defeated,” he proclaimed, “and the Stone of Threes is recovered, you may have both—the stone, for the Tower of High Sorcery, and all surviving dwarves as slaves, to build the tower and for any other purpose you wish. But whatever else we find within the mountain fortress, including the fortress itself, is mine. It will be mine alone, to do with as I wish.”

Kistilan knew well the price the High Overlord would be willing to pay for dominance over the dwarven lands. The overlord dreamed of an empire, just as Kistilan dreamed of ultimate power over all creatures.

Thus the assault on Thorbardin was directed primarily by one person, and that person was Kistilan. It was his intention to move swiftly, to conquer the dwarves of this place and establish himself as Lord Sorcerer before any who might contest his right came along.

So, using the elemental powers he had taken upon himself and drawing upon the magics of all the rest, he doubled the army of mercenaries, then doubled it again. Where seven thousand hired warriors had marched, now twenty-eight thousand closed upon the defense cordon set up by the dwarves at the base of Cloudseeker.

Sending thirty wizards each to follow and direct the three replicate armies, Kistilan himself—with an escort of twenty-seven acolytes who were sworn to his cause—accompanied the original mercenary force advancing from the southwest.

Perched comfortably on an elaborate throne floating fifty feet above the rearmost of the attacking mercenaries, Kistilan had an excellent view of the entire field of battle. He nodded in satisfaction as he saw the two dwarves flushed from the deserted trade camp fall, and again as he watched the little group of dwarves cut down by his forces' left flank. Both of the armies involved were replicates, created by sorcery.

"Resist magic?" he muttered. "Sigamon was a fool to believe such a thing of dwarves." With a wave of his hand, the wizard signaled the distant wizards following the conjure-armies. His forces and the second mass, just to his right, would hold back from the first assault. The third and fourth groups, to the east and west of the dwarven line, would begin the attack.

Kistilan muttered a spell and gave his orders to the empty air. Immediately, two voices—other mages nearly a mile away on each side—responded, their voices sounding as near to him as though they had been at his sides.

On the wide sweep of meadow west of the stone formations, the fourth army spread and quartered, to present a long, facing line to the waiting dwarves. At the call of trumpets, the thousands of men there began to move inexorably forward, company after company of footmen with shields, pikes, and swords. The front wave was a solid line of men, shoulder to shoulder and shield to shield, stretching nearly four hundred yards from end to end. The attackers advanced to within a hundred yards of the dwarven defenders, then stopped, facing them. Trumpets sounded again, and the front line of humans dropped down behind their extended shields. Behind them, archers

and Sackmen loosed their bolts. Arrows and hand-darts flew by the hundreds, whining and humming toward the nearest dwarves.

In the blink of an eye, the dwarves reformed, front ranks kneeling, second ranks raising their shields. The rattle of arrows and darts against dwarven steel was deafening. Here and there a dwarf staggered and fell, but the holes in the shield-wall were sealed instantly with other shields.

Again the archers and darters let fly, and again the dwarven line was barely touched. Men in the assault wave braced themselves on their shields, preparing to arise and advance.

It was what Willen Ironmaul had been waiting for. As the shield-bearers shifted their feet to straighten, there was an instant of vulnerability. Willen signaled, a drum sounded, and, from the rocks above the low slope, hundreds of iron balls shot out from hundreds of slings.

The timing was perfect. Everywhere, men fell, flopping over one another, bumping one another as they went down. The row of shields collapsed and slings hummed again, like nests of angry hornets. The second barrage of iron balls ripped through the unprotected ranks of archers and dartsmen. Without shields, and only lightly armored, these crumpled by the hundreds as heavy iron smashed against skulls, ribs, arms, and legs, into throats and abdomens, many balls caroming away to strike a second or third time in the massed ranks before losing their momentum.

A charge of mounted warriors, just assembling behind the archers, fell apart as iron balls found their marks among men and horses.

“Look at their fallen!” Damon Omenborn shouted, atop the Southgate ledge. “See what is happening!”

Everywhere, out on the field where men and horses had fallen, the air seemed to shimmer, a greenish glow that darted here and there. And the fallen bodies began to shimmer and fade.

“That army is not real!” Damon said. “It is just sorcery. Tell them!”

Drums sang, and the dwarven defense line hesitated, hearing the message. Then, as though by plan, a dozen or more wild-haired Klar warriors broke from one of the dwarven companies and ran toward

the attackers, howling and brandishing cudgels. Arrows sang, and blades lashed out as they closed, and within a second every Klar was on the ground, mortally wounded ... for a moment. Silence hung over the field as the twitching bodies sat upright, pulling disappearing shafts from themselves, picked up their cudgels, and charged again, right into the thick of the thousands of men. They charged and kept charging, leaving a widening trail of human bodies behind them, and slings hummed on the mountainside, reinforcing the attack.

“Crazy Klar,” Willen Ironmaul muttered.

“Crazy?” Damon said. “Maybe. Or maybe they’re just having fun. Give a Klar a good excuse to run amok, he’ll usually take it.”

On his floating throne behind the first army, Kistilan stared at the distant havoc ahead of him, then his eyes went cold. Somehow the dwarves, a few of them at least, *had* resisted his shock troops. Seven thousand perfectly good spell-built fighters out there, and a mere handful of dwarves were running loose among them, knocking down everything that stood. In anger, he pointed and muttered. Lightning flared from his finger, crackling over the heads of his warriors to dart bright bolts at the rampaging Klar. One by one, the dwarves staggered and fell, blackened and smoking.

The fourth army, though, was in total disarray, runaway horses and runaway men scampering everywhere. Many of them were heading blindly back toward the main force. Kistilan muttered, and the entire fourth army, in their thousands, shimmered and disappeared. On the field were only the bodies of the fallen, not yet faded away, and the smoking remains of the fallen dwarves.

Then, two of those moved, stirred, and sat upright.

Kral Baden shook himself, looked around, and grinned, bright teeth glinting in a soot-blackened face. To the other surviving Klar, he said, “Thought lightning hit us. But no lightning today. No clouds.”

* * * * *

The third army of humans had continued to advance and now faced the left flank of the little dwarven line, the lead units only a

few hundred yards away.

Lodar Yellowkilt, leading the elite Daewar corps called the Golden Hammer, had heard the drums and had seen the human forces on the west collapse and disappear. The drums were right, then. Of the three human hordes remaining, two were only wizardry—not “real” in dwarven terms, and therefore not truly dangerous. But which ones were the illusions?

Out on the field, human troops were forming, horsemen coming to the fore for a charge against the dwarven footmen. Lodar signaled, and a Hylar drummer raced to him. “Request permission to test this force,” Lodar said.

The drummer beat a quick tattoo on his vibrar, the deep, haunting rhythm rolling upward along the slopes. There was a moment’s hesitation, then a response. “The chief of chiefs gives permission,” the Hylar drummer translated.

“Volunteers!” Lodar called. Instantly, the entire Golden Hammer stepped forward, volunteering.

“Very well.” Lodar nodded. “Full strength.” He pointed. “Those horsemen will charge us,” he said. “Wait for my signal, then form two companies. First company line countercharge, down and defend, then reverse. Second company hold fast. Hammer and anvil.”

“They have lances,” a squad leader pointed out.

“They have no lances,” Lodar said bluntly. “That is only wizardry. They are not there.”

“Aye.” The squad leader grinned. “Like that other bunch those crazy Klar routed.”

Trumpets blared, and a hundred horsemen separated from the human front, trotting as they spread into a long line, each six feet from the next. Lodar Yellowkilt traced the pattern of Reorx on his armored breast and hoped that what he had told the squadman was true. His troops were convinced now that the enemies ahead were nothing more than figments of sorcery.

Lodar hoped earnestly that they were.

The human cavalry line came at a trot, then a canter, and then full gallop as steel-tipped lances leveled out ahead of them. In a

moment they had crossed half the field and were midway between their own forces and the dwarven line.

“By the plan!” Lodar shouted. “Charge!”

Shields high and hammers ready, half the Golden Hammer ran toward the charging horsemen, spreading into a spearhead formation, a tight, solid V of racing dwarves.

The human riders, caught off-guard by the unexpected countercharge, hesitated for an instant, and the line became ragged. But then they were galloping again, lances lowering toward the short, stocky targets of the dwarves. Hooves thundering, dwarven boots thumping an echo, the two formations clashed at midfield. Here a lance pierced dwarven armor, there a Daewar ducked beneath a thrust and broke the front legs of a horse with a single hammer blow. Then, abruptly, all the dwarves dropped to the ground, falling backward, their shields over them. Horses thundered over and around them, lances spearing downward, men falling as hammers lashed out from beneath shields, cutting their mounts from under them.

A long second passed, and the charge had swept by, thundering onward toward the second unit of the Golden Hammer, still holding the line. Where the forces had met was a jumble of bodies—men, horses, and dwarves everywhere. But among the dwarves, most raised their shields, jumped to their feet, and turned.

Lodar gritted his teeth in pain, looking at the broken lance head jutting from his breastplate. “It isn’t real,” he told himself fiercely. “It had *better* not be real.”

All around him, other maimed and pierced dwarves were telling themselves the same thing. And suddenly, lances faded, holes in armor closed, blood stopped flowing. And high on the mountainside beyond, drums sang of what sentinels saw. This army, like the one to the west, was only a figment.

But figment or not, the horsemen were still charging toward the second company of the Golden Hammer. “To the anvil!” Lodar ordered. “Crush formation!”

A solid phalanx of angry Daewar at his back, Lodar Yellowkilt headed after the human horsemen.

Still seventy strong, the horse charge hit the “anvil” of Daergar defense like a scythe hitting wheat ... and bounced off like a scythe hitting stone.

With shields braced by stout bats of wood, heeled into solid stone, the Daewar met the horse charge in the way they had learned a century before. Real or not, lances or no, a horse charge cannot break steel shields set in stone. The humans hit the line, lances breaking, and many were thrown from their saddles by the impact. Some horses went over the shields, where their saddles were emptied by sling-balls and hammer blows. Others veered aside, bumping and jostling each other. “Fall back!” a human shouted. “Regroup!”

But it was too late. Like steel-swathed, gold-bearded wrath, the first company of the Golden Hammer hit the riders from behind, crushing them against the “anvil” of the braced line. Everywhere steel clanged on steel, men screamed, horses floundered, and the solid, deep-throated chant of the Golden Hammer echoed: “Re-orx! Re-orx! Re-orx!” Dwarves fell, then stood to fight again. Men fell and did not.

Far out on the field, wizards guiding the replicate army ran here and there in confusion and frustration. The army began to disperse, large groups heading off to find cover, wizards following, bickering among themselves.

In a place where spring thaws had eroded the land along a tiny stream into a maze of high-banked gulches, Slip Codel had been hiding, waiting for a chance to ambush someone. The young Theiwar had become separated from his assigned group, and then had been cut off by the advance of the mercenaries from the east.

Now he crouched low, behind a leaning slab of stone on a tall bank, as hundreds of humans raced past him, some riding and some on foot. Slip watched them pass, many of them within arm’s length of his hiding place, and itched to ambush them. But he was alone, and they were many. After a few minutes, they had all passed, and Slip started to rise. Then he crouched again as a strange-looking man raced around a shoulder of rock and stopped, out of breath and panting. The man was unarmed and wore nothing more than a long

dirty robe of white material. With a hiss of anger, he peered at the clefts where the other humans had gone and raised a hand. “*Dek seratis*,” he said. “*Dek manit*—”

Whatever else he meant to say went unsaid. Slip Codel’s hammer rapped him on the skull, and the human slumped to the ground.

Slip dropped down beside him and walked around the inert form of the fallen man. The man was still breathing. Slip raised his hammer again, then changed his mind. Slinging his hammer, he crouched beside the man, lifted him across strong shoulders, and stood. With the unconscious human dragging the ground fore and aft, Slip headed for the slopes of Thorbardin. It might be, he felt, that somebody there would like to talk to this human about what was going on.

On the walled ledge outside Southgate, Willen Ironmaul and Damon Omenborn saw the destruction of the horse charge and knew that Lodar Yellowkilt had guessed correctly. They had identified the second conjured army.

Damon, peering through a far-seer devised by Hylar glaziers—magnifying lenses mounted within a brass tube—saw something now that he had not seen before. Far out on the Promontory, where two full identical armies yet remained, a speck hung in the air above one of the hordes. Twisting the ribbed bands of the device, he adjusted the lenses for greater magnification. The speck grew and became a man sitting in a chair ... a chair suspended from nothing, simply floating above the humans massed below.

He handed the far-seer to his father, pointing out the speck. Willen gazed through the lenses, then handed the device to Barek.

“One wizard has put himself above the rest,” Damon said. “He is in charge, then.” He turned to his father and the captain general. “If you had four armies and only one was real, which army would you lead?”

“The real one,” Willen Ironmaul said.

“Let’s test your theory,” Barek said to Damon. “It’s time we bring out the discobels.”

Damon nodded.

“I agree,” Willen said. “Let’s find out if the real army has a real wizard in charge.”

At the captain general’s command, drums sounded, and, a short distance down each sloping ramp, dwarves went to work with cables and winches. Slowly, from behind each main guard tower, there appeared a huge contrivance of lashed and braced timbers as tall as the towers themselves. Lumbering on great iron wheels, the two discobels rolled into view, and dwarves clambered up their sides, carrying tools. Winches aloft sang, and high on each tower a long, outthrust arm as thick as the bole of a mountain cedar swung back and back, creaking as cable-springs took the strain of its inertia.

When each arm was drawn back, a quarter of the way around the timber tower, stone anchors were set at the bases of the structures. More dwarves scampered upward, carrying steel-edged iron disks, each three feet across and eight inches thick at its center, tapering outward to the edge, which was a narrow band of tempered steel with sharp teeth three inches long. The things looked like giant, circular saw blades.

Carefully, dwarven tenders set the disks into curved slots at the end of each long, drawn-back arm, then scampered down from the structure, leaving only the throwing crews aloft.

Barek Stone gazed out across the littered field, gauging distances. “Three-fourths of a mile,” he called. “Full elevation.”

“Do these things have that kind of range?” Damon asked his father.

“Not quite,” Willen admitted. “Only about a thousand yards. But Barek knows what he’s doing.”

Damon gazed across the distance and nodded. “Ah,” he said. “The stone and the water?”

“Exactly,” Willen replied.

“The army on the right,” Barek called to the dwarves high on the towers. “The one with the dark speck floating above!”

“We can’t hit that little speck!” someone shouted back. “Rust, Barek! We may be good, but we aren’t *that* good!”

“Not the speck!” the captain general shouted. “Just hit the army! Aim for the middle, where the humans are thickest.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” the operator above responded. Cables strained, and winches creaked as the lashed arms of the discobel towers were adjusted for maximum elevation, and stop-blocks were set for aim. “Ready!” the voice from above said.

“Then do it!” Barek roared.

With twin crashes like echoing thunder, the discobels came alive. Released arms screamed around in half-arcs, crashed against their stop-blocks, and entire towers of lashed timber shuddered and rumbled. Twin disks soared away, high into the pale sky, then curved downward in the distance.

“They’re falling short!” someone said.

“The stone and the water,” Damon repeated.

At maximum range, the big disks slashed downward. They hit the ground two-thirds of the way toward the army of humans, raising great clouds of dust, and soared again, twin ricochets like two flat stones thrown across the surface of a lake.

In a second, the two disks reached the front ranks of the human horde and smashed through them, spinning and cleaving, slicing through everything in their paths. Men and horses fell—and parts of men and horses. Like howling, spinning reapers, the saw-edged disks clove twin trails of carnage through a hundred yards of mercenaries, cutting off heads in the front ranks, shearing torsos farther back, slicing off legs and feet beyond ... then hit the ground and skipped again, taking down more men as they went.

Above the army, the floating speck bobbed as the wizard stood upright on his throne, dancing and waving in fury.

“Nice shots,” Barek Stone rumbled. “Now train that seer on the dead ones. Watch them.”

The army seethed and swirled in panic, but where blood pooled around the hundreds of dead, nothing happened. The dead lay there, trampled by their comrades, and did not shimmer or fade.

“That’s it,” Damon announced. “That is the army we must face. All those other warriors are only illusions.” He raised his glass to watch the floating wizard and shouted, “Guards! Mirrors!”

All along the ramparts, guards reversed their shields, turning the backs of them outward as the air beyond Southgate crackled and flared.

Bolts of sorcerous energy directed at the discobel towers and the dwarves on the main ledge hit the bright mirrors and bounced away. Bolts of lightning shot from the mirrors outward, across the open plain, to dance among the mercenaries gathered there. Smoke erupted, and blazing men ran in all directions, searing and dropping as they ran. The remaining duplicate army, east of the main group, flashed and disappeared.

“That’s a trick I learned from my pet wizard,” Damon told his father.



18

Wizard's Wings

Days had passed since Quist Redfeather's imprisonment in the walled place the dwarves called the Valley of the Thanes, and he had begun to wonder whether the dwarves had forgotten that he was there. The packs and kegs of supplies they had left for him beside a sealed gate were the only signs he had that anybody even knew about him. He had been alone since the night he had watched a burly, angry dwarf use a mage's own magic to change the mage into a horse.

Through the days, the tall, dour Cobar had wandered the little valley, seeking a way out. Then, giving up on that—a dwarf might climb such walls, but no human ever would—he simply explored to pass the time. He found a place where neat, tended graves marked the burial grounds of the dwarves and wandered through it, wondering. Each short, carefully covered grave was placed in careful symmetry with all the others, and each was marked by a piece of cut stone inscribed with runes that Quist couldn't read. Despite his anger at the dwarves who had tricked him and imprisoned him in this place, he had no desire to desecrate the graves he found there. Such an act might have occurred to a Sackman or Rik raider, or some other such savage, but not to the proud Cobar. Though the runes told him nothing of who was buried there, they still indicated that each small grave was the resting place of someone who had been cared about ... someone who had mattered to those who buried him.

Strangely, it struck Quist as a Cobarlike thing to do, this marking of the graves of the cherished dead. His own people respected their dead, and so, it seemed, did the dwarves. In at least that way, he

thought, the dwarves were far more human than many humans he had met—such as those from the northern deserts and those who ruled Xak Tsaroth—*especially* those who ruled Xak Tsaroth.

What would the High Overlord do to Quist's family when he failed to return from his mission? The Cobar didn't know, but it pained him to think about it. Whatever their fate, he would devote his life to getting even.

At times riding the big red horse he called Enchanter—appropriately, since until recently it had been a human wizard—and sometimes afoot, the Cobar roamed the lonely little valley and waited for someone to come, or something to happen. And now it had. With first light of morning he had awakened to see a small yellow banner fluttering on a stick near the wall where his first supplies had been left. The banner marked a fresh stack of supplies, and atop the stack lay all of his weapons—oiled, polished, and unharmed.

He wondered what it meant. Did the dwarves intend to release him soon? Had they already given him a way to freedom that he simply could not see? Or—the thought occurred to him—was something happening beyond the valley that might cause him jeopardy? Were they giving him the chance to defend himself?

The idea wasn't surprising. In the time he had spent with Damon, Quist had noticed a strange sort of honor in the big dwarf.

Could dwarves have honor? He turned the question over in his mind. Dwarves were not human, but in many of their private ways they were *like* humans. Could not a people who thought and reasoned as well as humans—and who honored their dead—also understand chivalry?

Whatever the reason, Quist had his weapons back, and throughout the day he roamed the little valley, often looking upward toward the high ramparts of the sheer walls. The day did seem different from the days before. The drums—the dwarven drums, which seemed never still in this land—were extraordinarily busy. Obviously something of note was going on. And once, distantly, on an errant breeze, Quist thought he heard the sound of

human trumpets. Twice at least during the day, the air above the valley shimmered and crackled with the taste of magics unleashed.

And he noticed, more and more through the day, that Enchanter followed him around closely, seeming always to be at his heels and often raising a handsome equine head to gaze aloft at the rim of the valley and the open sky above.

The horse seemed to sense things that Quist could not sense. The animal was skittish and nervous. Once, when it sidled against him, he pushed it away, growling, "Quit that! You don't know anything! You're just a horse!"

The horse turned its head to stare at him with big, thoughtful eyes, then shook its head violently and whinnied. It almost seemed to be trying to talk, and Quist grinned at it, stroking its neck. "Just can't speak a spell, can you," he said. "That's probably the only thing that keeps you from transforming yourself back into a wizard, and if you did that I'd have to kill you, because if I didn't, you'd probably try to kill me."

Again the horse gazed at him thoughtfully. It turned then and ambled away as though forgetting about him. But for an hour afterward, as evening shadows drifted across the valley, he could see the animal stamping around, tossing its head, and he often heard the strange whinnying sound, as though it were trying to talk.

It was nearly dark, and Quist was just building a small fire, when Enchanter came back. In the gloom, the horse stood over him, then lowered its head and nudged him with its nose. He glanced up. "What do you want now? I'm busy!"

He went back to his fire, blowing his kindling alight, and the horse nudged him again, almost pushing him into the fire.

The Cobar stood, frowned, and started to scold the animal, then stopped. Somehow, in the near darkness, it looked different than it had before. He stepped aside, just as his fire caught and gave him light to see. Quist gasped, jumped back, and gripped the hilt of his blade. The horse had wings! Somehow, it had managed to grow a pair of wide, red-feathered wings that unfolded gracefully as he stared, then folded back along its sides.

"You're still a wizard," Quist snapped. "You managed a spell!"

The horse nodded, its big eyes studying him.

“You could grow wings, but you couldn’t turn yourself into a human again?”

The horse shook its head sorrowfully.

“Are you going to try to kill me?” The Cobar half drew his blade, crouching.

The horse shook its head determinedly and pawed at the ground.

“Then what do you want?” Quist demanded.

The horse half-turned and sidled toward him, lowering its near wing almost to the ground. When it was only a step away, it curtsied gracefully, extending one foreleg and bending the other, offering him its back. The motion was unmistakable to any horseman.

“You want me to ride you,” Quist muttered.

The horse nodded.

The Cobar hesitated for a second, then with a bound he leapt aboard the horse, his legs tightening around its girth beneath the wings. He drew his sword, raising it over the flowing mane before him. “All right,” he said. “But we aren’t going to hurt each other, are we?”

The horse looked around at him as though he had insulted it, then crouched, sprang, and extended great, beating wings. The ground fell away below, and they flew in a climbing spiral toward the rim of the valley above.

The towering mass of Cloudseeker Peak rose into view, then the Promontory beyond, and Quist whistled. Out there on the great meadow were hundreds of fires—an entire army encamped beneath the stars. And all along the south face of the peak—and on the lower slopes below—were torches and lamps.

The horse rose higher, circling as Quist realized what he was seeing. The dwarves were under siege. An army was at their doorstep, and there had been fighting. Enchanter set his wings and swooped above the south face of the mountain, diving to within fifty yards of the great portal there before climbing away. Quist saw a massive gateway, ranked by hundreds of dwarves in full armor. Some of them pointed upward and shouted, but Enchanter veered to

the right and headed out over the broken lands toward the Promontory. The campfires of an army spread before and below, and Quist squinted, then hissed in revulsion as some of the figures around them became clear. “Sackmen!” he muttered. “Sackmen and Rik raiders! Mercenaries!”

Near the center of the great encampment Enchanter set his wings and dived toward a fire apart from all the rest. Around it, many figures stood and sat. A dark-hatted one was speaking, gesturing and waving angrily while the rest listened. Quist realized that none of them carried weapons. Wizards? he wondered.

Still high in the sky, the flying horse wheeled and raced away, back the way they had come. Before Quist realized it, they were over the Valley of the Thanes again, and descending. “No!” he shouted. “We just got out of there! Don’t go back!” But the horse continued to descend, and the valley walls closed around them. At the bottom, Enchanter touched down lightly, and Quist jumped off, waving his sword. “Why did you bring me back here?”

As though in response, the horse folded its wings and ambled toward the little fire the man had left. When it reached the fire, it turned, looked at him, then extended a big delicate hoof, pointing. Beside the fire lay Quist’s shield, dagger-belt, bow, and quiver, just where he had left them. “Oh,” the Cobar said. “Well, thank you for remembering my things.”

* * * * *

The day had gone well for the Holgar, all things considered. Blood had been shed, but most of it was human blood. Not counting the bogus “armies” which the dwarves stubbornly considered only mirages—once they had identified them—hundreds of mercenaries had fallen before the discobel disks, and quite a few more in a Daergar attack on the outskirts of their encampment after dark. By the best estimates of all the commanders, dwarven losses during the entire day were about fifty.

And in late evening, word had come to Willen Ironmaul that Northgate was complete, its immense plug installed and in operation. He immediately ordered Northgate closed. Setting the

massive plug in place would free additional thousands of guards and workers to help meet the attack on Southgate. Even now, most of the population of Gatekeep, behind Northgate, was streaming southward through the subterranean realm, donning armor as they came.

One disturbing thing still bothered Willen. With word that Northgate was complete, Cale Greeneye came to him. “We have brought the country people to safety here,” the Neidar said. “But we will not stay. We do not belong here, Willen, beneath this weight of stone, any more than you and the other Holgar belong out in the open spaces.”

Willen gazed at his brother-in-law thoughtfully. They had both been Calnar in another time, and they had both been Hylar in the migration across Ansalon. But even then, Cale Greeneye had been different. A person of the mountains and the open skies, he had never been comfortable in the subterranean abodes of the Holgar, and over the years a great many others, of many tribes, had joined him. They had become a different people, the Neidar. Just as the Holgar thanes—Hylar, Daewar, Theiwar, Daergar, and many Klar—were people of the stone, the Neidar were people of the sun. As the Holgar were people of the hammer, so the Neidar were people of the axe.

“Some of us, those with families, will remain here,” Cale said. “But the rest are leaving. We have done what we can within Thorbardin. From this point, we would only be in the way.”

Willen nodded and extended a hand. “Take the horses, then, Cale,” he said. “Take them and make good use of them.”

Some time later, Willen heard that the Neidar had left Thorbardin, and Northgate had closed behind them.

There was still the concern about magical assault—that wizards might somehow circumvent the sealed plug at either gate—but spotters with far-seeing lens tubes had been at work all day, up near the crag, counting mages. It was a fair guess that at least for now the entire assault on Thorbardin—wizards and all—was concentrated on Southgate. So only a small company of guards and operators remained at Northgate.

In all, it had been a successful day in the defense of Thorbardin. But it was only the first day, and there was still an army out there on the Promontory, an army that numbered at least six thousand organized human raiders and more than a hundred wizards.

“We have won a day,” Willen Ironmaul told Barek Stone. “But we have not won a war. Today they played with illusions and had a look at some of our defenses. Tomorrow they will get serious.”

On the sloping rampart below the main ledge, there were shouts and a scuffle. Guards raised lanterns, and those on the ledge saw a struggling group coming toward them—a dozen or more burly Theiwar dragging a white-robed human among them, pushing and prodding him. The man was muttering things, and now and then several dwarves floated upward a foot or two, then descended angrily, swearing in true Theiwar fashion. For a moment, two or three Theiwar seemed to glow with an eerie light. Then another grew bat wings and sprouted fangs which curved down over his beard.

“Stop that!” a Theiwar snapped, delivering a well-placed kick at the man’s shin. The human howled, muttered something, and the kicker’s head became, momentarily, that of a rabbit. Another Theiwar reached up, grabbed the man’s beard, and bent him down to slap him across the cheek with a hard hand. “You heard us,” the dwarf said. “Stop that!”

The man glared around at the dwarves, muttered something else, and seemed to disappear. His captors clung stubbornly to empty air and continued their struggling journey. “It’s all right,” one called. “He isn’t gone. He just invisibled himself. He’s done that several times.”

Damon Omenborn hurried down the rampart to stop them before they reached the gate. “Where did you get this one?” he asked.

“Slip caught him out in the breaks,” a captor said, indicating a long-armed young Theiwar who was clinging grimly to some unseen part of the unseen captive.

“He’s still here,” Slip Codel assured the big Hylar. “Here, I’ll show you.” He reached up, groping in empty air, then with two fingers he pried open invisible eyelids. Between his fingers, a glaring eye

appeared. "I don't think magickers can invisible their eyes," the young Theiwar explained. "If they're open, you can always see them."

"Interesting." Damon noted that by squinting he could vaguely see the outline of the wizard. The invisibility was, after all, only magic, and Damon had learned that the more obstinately he refused to accept magic, the less effective it seemed to be.

"Who are you?" he asked the glaring eye between Slip Codel's fingers.

"None of your business," an angry voice growled. "*Delatas sepit mikti ...*"

"*Chapak!*" Damon finished, pointing a strong finger at the eye.

The unseen mage squealed, thrashed, and became abruptly visible, standing in the midst of a swarm of bees.

"Hold him!" Damon said. "Ignore the bees; they aren't real!"

The Theiwar kept their grips on the struggling, howling man. "Wow!" Slip said. "Did you do that, Damon?"

"No, he did. But he intended to do it to me."

"*Ka—kapach!*" the wizard stuttered, flailing against the bees swarming around him. The bees continued to swarm, stinging him mercilessly. "H-h-help!" he cried. "P-plea-please ... help!"

"Help how?" Damon asked casually.

"S-s-say '*Ka-k-k-ah-k-kapach!*'"

"Will you behave yourself?"

"I w-w-will! I-I s-sw-swear! Ow!"

"*Kapach,*" Damon said. Instantly, the bees were gone, though red welts were rising all over the man.

"You should take up another trade," Damon noted. "You aren't very good at magic." He pointed out across the dark Promontory with its myriad distant fires. "Who's in charge out there?"

"K-Kisti-Kistilan," the wizard said. His stutter was becoming more pronounced.

"Is he the one in the floating chair?"

"Th-that's-uh-that's him."

"What does he want?"

“He w-wants this p-puh-place,” the unhappy wizard said. His face was beginning to swell grotesquely from bee stings. “The r-r-rest of us w-uh-want the S-st-stone of Th-uh-thr-three-threes. Kis-Kistilan w-wants uh-Th-Thorbardin.”

“None of you can have either one,” Damon assured him.

“You c-can’t st-s-uh-s-stand against m-m-magic!” the man snapped. “You-y-you’re foo-f-fools to th-th-think you c-ca-c-uh-can.”

“Are we?” The Hylar pointed at the man again. “*Delatas sepit mikti ...*”

“N-n-no!” the wizard shrieked.

Damon grinned at him, then lowered his hand.

“H-how ... how did y-you, uh, l-l-learn that?” the man quavered, stammering uncontrollably.

“I learned it from you just a moment ago. I have an excellent memory.”

* * * * *

With the coming of dark, most of the forces on the outer line had withdrawn to the nearer perimeter to rest and have their supper. The humans, as night-blind as any Daewar or Hylar, were not likely to move until morning. But here the dwarven commanders had failed to reckon on the wizards. An hour before first moonrise, trumpets sounded on the near slopes, and attack forces of human mercenaries charged the outer dwarven camps, following patches of eerie light that lit the ground ahead of them as moonlight through openings in the clouds might light a stormy night.

Only intense discipline saved the Golden Hammer—farthest out on the main trail slope—from annihilation. Several hundred Sackmen warriors, guided by the skills of wizards, came out of darkness and fell upon the Daewar brigade with howls of triumph and the clashing of metal blades.

Had the surprised Daewar been any other non-Hylar unit, they would have been massacred. But at the first hint of attack, even before Lodar Yellowkilt could call orders, the Daewar footmen had leapt into circle formation, forming a solid, double ring of steel shields and steel blades. Some of the Sackmen got through the first

ring as dwarves fell before hand-darts and singing long swords, but none got through the second ring. For long minutes, the fighting was furious, steel ringing on steel, the war cries of the mercenaries a wild counterpoint to the chanting of the fighting dwarves as their blades snaked out from behind their shields and came back dripping red.

The outer ring was breached once, and then again, and yet again, but each time, dwarves from the inner ring moved up to fill the gaps. Within the circle, dwarven slings hummed as slingers sailed round after round of iron shot into the press of humans. And at the center of his troops, Lodar Yellowkilt stood atop a water keg, deflecting arrows and darts with shield, helm, and bracelets as he squinted at the line of combat lit by magical glare. He saw an intense push by humans forming just beyond the south side of his ring and shouted, "Downtrail quadrant, break and charge!"

Just as the humans at that point rushed the circle of dwarves, the circle bulged outward toward them, ranked shields parted suddenly, and a chanting flood of dwarves charged out, shields high, directly into the face of the attack. The two charges met and bored into each other, then the humans withdrew. Slingers pelted them from behind as they ran.

In the broken gullies south of the main trail slope, the human surprise attack was not as successful. These were old hunting grounds of the wild Theiwar, and the Theiwar holding the sector now were well acquainted with them. It was here that a hundred or so invaders learned what some of their ancestors had learned in times past: the specialty of the Theiwar was ambush.

The humans, roughly a hundred mercenaries and two or three wizards, charged into the breaks, aiming at the peaceful cook-fires just ahead. By the time they saw that the fires were unattended, it was too late to turn back. Slim Theiwar blades and dark-iron Theiwar hammers ran red with blood on that night, and very few of the attackers escaped.

Daergar night-fighters, on their way back from harassing the human camps, were not as fortunate as the Theiwar. A blaze of eerie light caught most of them with their masks off and blinded them as

two squadrons of invaders raced among them, slashing and cutting. The Daergar skirmishers left nearly forty dead on that bloody field—almost half their company.

It was mixed infantry that stood off the mobs of humans who made it almost to the ramparts. Under direct command of Barek Stone, four companies of Thorbardin guards formed ranks below the sloping roads, and the humans who made it there, past several other dwarven units, were no match for them. The fighting lasted no more than minutes, and then the invaders turned and disappeared into sudden darkness.

The surprise attacks had not reached Thorbardin, but, added to the fighting of the day before, they had taken their toll. Of twelve hundred dwarves who had formed the outer defense the previous morning, no more than a thousand remained. Willen Ironmaul heard the reports and called in the guard units to form an intense cordon on the main slopes, from the west rampart to the east one, and it was there, battered and bloodied, that the defenders waited for morning light.



The Day of Destiny

Dawn's first banners, rising above the plains of southern Ergoth, revealed a grim panorama below Southgate of Thorbardin. Hundreds of morning fires wove layers of smoke above the lower slopes of Cloudseeker Peak, where thousands of human warriors massed, making ready for all-out assault on the dwarven fortress. No longer concentrated on the distant Promontory, the human hordes had moved forward through the night, gaining ground in skirmish after skirmish, until the open meadows were behind them and just ahead were the massive slopes of the fortress mountain.

By first light, the human invaders prepared their attack, while barely a quarter mile ahead of them, and a thousand feet up, dwarves by the hundreds poured forth from the portal of Southgate to stream down the sloped ramparts and reinforce the defensive positions on the face of the mountain, desperately close to their final barricade—Southgate.

Willen Ironmaul and the Council of Thanes had determined that Thorbardin must be defended from without for as long as possible. “Only if we hold the slopes,” Willen advised the council, “can we avoid a state of closed siege. If we have to, we will retreat within and close the gate. But when that is done, we can no longer fight. We will be trapped within our own fortress, and the realm beyond will be undefended. Reorx forbid, but if it comes to barricading ourselves in Thorbardin, Kal-Thax will be lost.”

A closed siege, the thane leaders agreed, would be the end of the dwarven realm in the Kharolis mountains. The greatest strength of Thorbardin—its impenetrability—was at the same time its greatest weakness as a custodial fortress for the realm around it. There were

only two practical entrances, Southgate and Northgate. If the gates were both closed, and no one could get in, then neither could anyone get out.

Once Thorbardin was closed, the humans could mount siege on both gates indefinitely—and in the meantime they could loot, plunder, and occupy all the lands Thorbardin was built to protect. And the dwarven forces, within their subterranean stronghold, could do nothing about it. Without the presence of Thorbardin and its fighting forces, the lands of the Einar and the burgeoning settlements of the Neidar would be lost. Thorbardin itself might survive—for a time—but Kal-Thax would not. Thus it was decided that, though Northgate was now closed, Southgate would remain open at all costs as long as there were dwarves enough to defend it. Closing the great gate would be the final retreat and the last resort.

By calling up all the reserves, Thorbardin's outside forces could almost equal those massed out on the slope. But the talking drums said that more humans were crossing Ergoth now, drawn by news of war and dreams of plunder. Through border traders, the knights of Ergoth had sent warning. Something was happening within the human city of Xak Tsaroth. The overlords' minions had withdrawn behind the walls, the city had been closed, and no news came from there. Now only the scattered outposts of the human knights stood between roving hordes and the road to the west, and the knights had their hands full defending their own lands.

Effectively, the warning was that the dwarves were on their own now, and may the gods protect them.

It was a grim and determined Damon Omenborn who stepped through the final gateway on this morning. He wore full field armor beneath a gray cloak, and in the crook of his arm he carried the red-crested helmet that had belonged to Mace Hammerstand. He carried both sword and hammer, and the shield slung behind his shoulder was emblazoned with the hammer-and-fist legend of the Roving Guard. Behind him, two hundred similarly armed and similarly grim young dwarves filed into view.

Cable Graypath, First of the Ten, recognized the chief's son and bowed slightly in recognition of the proud symbol he wore, then

stepped aside. Beyond him, Willen Ironmaul turned, and his eyes narrowed at the sight of his son. "What is this?" he growled. "Damon, who appointed you captain of the Roving Guard?"

"They did," Damon said, returning his father's frown with one just as strong and determined. "The survivors of Mace Hammerstand's force. They came to me after nightfall and asked my pledge. I gave it. Mace was my friend."

"I see," the chief of chiefs said. "Well, as leader of the Roving Guard, it is your right to choose your duty. Have you a choice?"

"The wizards," Damon replied without hesitation. "I have seen them, I have dealt with them, and I have taught the Roving Guard what I know. I seek leave to concentrate my forces on the magic-makers among our enemies."

"The wizard Kistilan?" Barek Stone asked.

"He is my primary target," Damon said.

"The wizards hide behind their hordes," Willen said, scowling. "How can you get to them?"

"Let me try," Damon urged. "No one else is better equipped to fight them. I have tasted their vile magic. I have even learned a little of it."

Willen sighed. There could be no argument on that score. His son was right. "But I had counted on having you here," he said. "If the wizards get past us ... if any of them should get inside the gate ..."

"Trust Gem Bluesleeve," Damon said. "That wily Daewar has a plan for that."

"I know of his plan." Willen shuddered. "I hope I never have to see it put to practice." He gazed at his big son, then shrugged and clapped him on his metal-clad shoulder. "The members of the Roving Guard were within their rights to select you, Damon. And you are within your rights to name your own assignment. Very well, you are so ordered. Just ..."

When his father turned away without continuing, Damon asked, "Just what?"

"Nothing," Willen growled, not looking around. "Nothing more than I would ask of any warrior of Thorbardin. Take care of yourself ... Damon Omenborn."

Damon saluted, the closed-fist salute of the Hylar, then turned and strapped Mace Hammerstand's crested helm onto his head. With no further formalities, Damon marched away, down the eastern rampart, toward the old Theiwar trails. Grim and determined, his volunteers—for that was the nature of the Roving Guard, all were volunteers—marched at his back. To a dwarf, they were remembering Mace Hammerstand and the awful thing that had killed him—a thing brought forth upon Kal-Thax by the conniving and plotting of wizards.

* * * * *

Assisted by magic, human engineers had been at work in the forests flanking the eastern Promontory, and not siege engines rolled forward across the meadows—catapults, sling-rams, and caissons creeping along on wheels and runners in the shadows of tall, shielded towers which could each hold and protect a dozen ranks of archers and darters.

The first such tower to come within range was cut to rubble by disks from the great discobels on the dwarves ramparts, but stones from catapults showered the discobels in return, smashing the frame of one of them so that it yawed, tipped, and fell crashing from the high rampart, tearing itself to pieces on the rockfall slope below. The second discobel was withdrawn for repair, and dwarven slingers flanking the main guard towers concentrated their fire on the humans' near engines, driving back their crews and footmen.

One slung catapult was abandoned three hundred yards from the western rampart, and when human foot men from the near ranks ran out to retrieve it they were met by a company of the dwarven home guard fresh from the citadel of Gatekeep. Fierce, hand-to-hand fighting ensued, sweeping this way and that along the wide paved staging area. Human and dwarf warriors met and mingled, swords slashing, hammers flashing, shield ringing with the song of deadly conflict.

Hand to hand and eye to belt buckle, the tall, savage people of the plains threw themselves upon the short stocky people of the mountains and met a grim, determined resistance as fierce as their

own attack. Shield high and weapons whining, the dwarves drove into the human ranks like wedges of short demons, and many a human learned the truth of the legends—that inch for inch a dwarf was both heavier and stronger than a human and that dwarven steel was the finest in the world.

In the thick of the melee, Theiwar workers made their way to the abandoned catapult, defended it with sledges swung by massive arms, and turned it.

Seeing what the Theiwar were doing, the home guard responded, gradually changing the pattern of the conflict from random melee to a purposeful herding of the humans. The guard spread into lines, swept forward along two fronts of the human assault, and, blow by blow, drove the tall people back, compacting them against their own kind. Wielding weapons and prybars furiously, the dozen Theiwar—they had numbered twenty when they first reached the catapult—lowered the engine’s elevating blocks and anchored its trailing runners, then shouted in unison, “Now!”

As the home guards turned and raced away, the catapult was released, point-blank, directly into the crowded human defense. Its missile, a two-hundred-pound stone, carved a yard-wide path of death through the crowd, and the home guards turned again, rushed upon the survivors, and renewed their attack.

Humans turned to flee, and the retreat became a rout until the pursuing dwarves were flanked by other units of the human army and cut down from both sides.

Lodar Yellowkilt’s Golden Hammer charged into the thick of this new fight, a murderous, solid rank of bright shields, bright cloaks, and bright blades, scattering humans as it went.

As though the widening conflict at the western staging flat were a signal, the human army launched an all-out attack all along the dwarven defensive front. For long minutes the dwarven lines held, meeting every thrust with good dwarven steel. But as each human fell, a dozen more swarmed in to take his place, and the dwarves began to retreat, step by step, crouching and shielding, slashing and pounding as they worked their way backward up the narrowing stage-ways toward the ramparts themselves.

One large group of barbarians, breaking away from the rest, launched a direct attack between the ramparts. Using picks, throw-hooks, and climbing lines they headed directly for the gateway ledge two hundred feet above. Barek Stone watched them come, swarming up the steep slope, and waited until most of them were committed, clinging to their lines, before responding. At his order, a hinged shelf atop the ledge wall tipped upward, dwarves with prybars behind it, and dozens of open casks filled with burning lamp oil cascaded down on the climbers. Walls of fire blazed up from the sedge and brush below, and the screaming humans disappeared into the fire.

Catapult stones and tumbling log rams arced above the furious combat at the lower ramparts to smash into the dwarven guard towers. One of the human archers' towers rolled into place, and volleys of arrows streamed from it, seeking the dwarves above on the ledge and those along the climbing ramparts. Most of the bolts caromed off dwarven shields, but here and there, a few buried themselves in dwarven flesh.

Vicious hand-darts, the favored weapon of Sackmen raiders, hissed through the turmoil like striking vipers, deadly in their accuracy. All along the front, human raiders pushed forward, driving the dwarves ever back, up the staging areas and onto the ramparts themselves, relentless human hordes following and pushing.

The second discobel, hastily repaired, rolled forth from behind a guard tower, dwarves falling from its timbers as arrows and darts found them. But as they fell, others climbed, and the tower was aligned, armed, and discharged, its crackling thunder echoing above the turmoil below. The great, toothed iron disk flashed in high sunlight for an instant, then collided with the human archers' tower, cutting cleanly through half its timbers. The tower tilted, timbers groaning and cables singing as they broke, then collapsed straight down upon itself, carrying its human occupants with it.

Fresh marauders, coming up from behind, veered around the wreckage and its screaming, bleeding victims as they ran to strengthen the attacking forces.

For an hour the fighting raged unchecked, and then another hour, and Willen Ironmaul saw, bleakly, that the dwarves had lost fully half the frontal space they had set out to defend. The massive human army pressed forward relentlessly. Clearly now, Willen could see the wizards behind them, driving them on.

The humans fought like maniacs. They were obviously only mercenaries, but the way they threw themselves into battle was awesome. It was as though they were driven by devils, and Willen realized that what he was seeing was the power of magic on the human mind. Somehow, the wizards had altered their warriors so that each seemed to see himself as invincible and invulnerable. Without the wizards, these human marauders would have faltered long since. But the spells that had been put upon them drove them on relentlessly.

Suddenly the chief of chiefs saw something else and pointed.

Sweeping in from the Promontory, behind the human ranks, was a thundering arc of mounted dwarves, nearly a thousand in number.

“The Neidar!” Willen shouted. “Cale Greeneye has brought the Neidar!”

Scattering surprised wizards and stunned laggards, the Neidar charge hit the rear of the human assault and collapsed it inward. Like legions of death, the grim open-sky dwarves drove into the enemy, broad axes flashing steel-bright and blood-red, their war horses white-eyed and back-eared as they kicked humans aside and trampled the fallen.

It was only a quick slash-and-run attack and ended before most of the humans realized what had hit them, but it was enough to break the momentum of the assault. Humans withdrew everywhere, backing away warily. The dwarves in front of the fortress regained their formations and mounted new defenses at the very aprons of the stronghold’s mighty ramparts.

Out on the verge of the Promontory, the Neidar strikers wheeled their mounts in salute, and drums spoke above the noise of battle and withdrawal. Ignoring a hasty volley of arrows from below, Willen Ironmaul climbed to the top of the gate-ledge wall and raised an arm in salute. In the distance, Cale Greeneye responded, then

wheeled his forces and headed eastward, down the Promontory toward the distant border of Ergoth.

Like Willen, he had heard the sentinel drums in the night and was on his way to repel the wandering marauders crossing Ergoth toward Kal-Thax in hope of gaining spoils from the fighting there.

Casually blocking a final arrow with his shield, Willen Ironmaul, chief of chiefs of Thorbardin, jumped from the wall to the protected ledge and told Barek Stone, "Cale has given us a few minutes to regroup. Make good use of the time. The humans will attack again as soon as they catch their breaths." He turned, then, shading his eyes to look out across the bloody fields of battle. In the distance, beyond the masses of human invaders, something new was happening. Grabbing a far-seer, he set it to his eye and saw the red crests and gray cloaks of the members of the Roving Guard, moving fast, spreading into an assault line.

"It's Damon," the chief of chiefs muttered. "Damon has found the wizards."

* * * * *

By old Theiwar trails and Daewar traders' routes, the volunteers of the Roving Guard had bypassed the masses of human warriors pressing upon Thorbardin and come to its rearmost lines just as the Neidar horsemen plunged into the assault there.

Seeing what Cale was doing, Damon had held his volunteers back, then moved in swiftly behind the Neidar, cutting down a few dozen scattered defenders to concentrate on the wizards running about in confusion.

Ignoring their "magics," the Roving Guard cut out, separated, and began rounding up the practitioners of high sorcery, herding and driving them, pushing them out onto the Promontory, farther and farther from the human forces they had been directing. Not all of the wizards fell into their sweep. Some—perhaps many—were still with the barbarian army, protected by its ranks. But Damon had not expected to get all of them. His hope was only to find and separate enough of the magic-users that their absence would soon be noticed. By the time Damon looked back, to estimate a half mile of distance

from the nearest marauders, his trotting wedge of determined dwarves had nearly fifty motley, raging humans running ahead of them, spitting spells and shouting curses.

All around, fires erupted on the landscape. Lightning flared, and illusions tangled with illusions. The day went from day to night and back to day again; monsters grew from clumps of brush; rain pelted down through bright sunlight; and dwarf after dwarf seemed to turn into something else, but stubbornly kept moving.

At one point, Damon seemed to be flanked by a seething gargoyle and a porcupine, and at another point it seemed that he, himself, was sprouting doors and shingles. But the single-minded rejection of spells that he had drilled into the survivors of Mace Hammerstand's proud legion held strong, and the mages scampered ahead of the determined line, at the mercy of blades, shield edges, and heavy hammers if they lagged.

Caught completely off-guard, the wizards fled in confusion, their spells interfering with one another far more than with the purposes of the determined dwarves. Some of them didn't survive. Hammers and swords put an end to some spells before they were completed, and the fallen wizards lay forgotten on the ground like crumbs dropped by a busy cartman having lunch as he worked.

A mile out onto the Promontory, Damon and the Roving Guard herded the wizards up a knoll, within clear view of the besieged and the besiegers on the mountain slopes, and halted them there.

"What do you think you're doing, dwarf?" an angry magic-user demanded. "You can't get away with this, you know!"

"We have so far," Damon pointed out.

Quickly, with a wave of his hand, the mage muttered a spell and smiled in satisfaction. "Now, before you all die, just out of curiosity, why did you bring us out here? What did you think to gain from us?"

"What did you do, just then?" Damon asked.

"The spell? I summoned Kistilan. He is the favored of the Scions, with powers beyond most. He will deal with you. But I asked you, what did you want of us?"

“I have what I wanted,” Damon assured him. “You just gave it to me.” With a raised hand, he signaled his guards. Grinning savagely, the gray-cloaked dwarves moved in on their captives, some of them pulling the men down, others wielding their hammers. Some of the wizards might eventually recover from the taps their skulls received that day; others would not. The power of a hammer is in the arm that swings it, and the purpose of the swing is in the mind behind that arm.

Within seconds, Damon Omenborn and his Roving Guard stood alone on the knoll, surrounded by dead and unconscious wizards. As one, then, they turned to look northward. A dot had appeared there, in the air above the lower slopes, and was growing in size as it sped toward them.

Kistilan the Dark, Kistilan the Deadly, Kistilan the Would-be Conqueror, intended ruler of Thorbardin—Kistilan who was one of only a few given the favor of the Scions and the force of elemental magics—had heard the summons from the captured wizards. Kistilan was coming now, to strike down the arrogant dwarves who had dared to defy him.



Favored of the Powers

Within moments of the departure southward of the dark mage, Kistilan, the relentless, fanatical attack on the slopes below Southgate began to falter—at first only a little, but enough for the defending dwarves to notice a change in the intensity of the human marauders. It was as though, here and there, groups of them became confused and uncertain, pausing in their attacks, shifting to defense as they gaped at the strewn bodies of their own kind all around them.

It was Quill Runebrand, the lorekeeper, who suggested a reason. Quill had come to Southgate carrying an armload of scrolls in which he had recorded all that Damon Omenborn had earlier reported about the nature of magic. He was hoping to question the big Hylar about the strange “double vision” which illusionary sorcery seemed to create. Quill had missed Damon, though he arrived in time to see the Neidar attack on the humans’ rear forces and to get a glimpse through a lens tube of the Roving Guard rounding up wizards.

The little he saw, before a burly Daewar took the lens tube away from him, answered his questions. He saw one of the Roving Guard change abruptly into a tusked ogre and realized that he could see both the “ogre” illusion and the reality of the guard as he actually was, simultaneously. He scribbled furiously at a scroll, jotting down his observation, then looked up again in time to see the floating magician—or magician on the floating chair—soar off to the south.

Occupied with such thoughts, it seemed obvious to the scrollster what it meant when—as Willen Ironmaul noted—the human horde seemed to lose its momentum.

“Some of those companies are without their wizards,” Quill said. “They are seeing the field now as it really is, rather than as they have been made to believe, and they don’t like it. There are a lot of dead humans down there.”

Barek Stone turned to gaze curiously at him, then nodded. “He may have something there,” he told Willen. “There aren’t many wizards left among them, and they must have their hands full.”

“Worry about the reasons later,” the chief of chiefs rumbled. “Drummers! Sound general advance!”

The drums sang a fast tattoo, and all along the slope dwarven companies pushed forward, beating and slashing at the hordes of humans before them. With their short, sturdy statures, and the downhill slope in their favor, the dwarves pushed the human assault backward down the hill, and at several points the human defenders turned and ran in panic.

“Locate the wizards,” Willen told his spotters. “Damon didn’t get them all. Where are the rest?”

As though in answer to his question, human heads appeared suddenly, directly before him across the ledge wall, and a long arm drove a flashing blade toward his neck. Barely in time, the chief of chiefs got his shield up to deflect the killing cut. The sword clanged on steel, flashed above his head, and Willen continued the shield motion, hurling himself forward, half across the low wall of the ledge, to drive the corner of his shield into the man’s face. Blood spurted, the man screamed and toppled backward ... and disappeared.

In a glance, Willen saw that the man had been standing on a flat stone, levitated upward by sorcery. And there were three others still on the stone. Willen rolled aside as a spiked cudgel smashed down upon the wall where he had been and saw Barek Stone’s sword flick past him to skewer the second attacker. The third was raising a sword when a heavy lens tube bounced off the side of his head, hurling him from the stone. Then Willen was face-to-face with the one man remaining on the floating stone, and his eyes narrowed. The man was unarmed, but by his stance and his look of concentration, the chief of chiefs knew him. A wizard. The man

started to mutter a spell, and suddenly someone dashed past Willen, over the wall and onto the flying stone.

Quill Runebrand, babbling in his excitement, grabbed the wizard's beard, pulled his head down, and thrust the small end of a lens tube roughly into his mouth. The spell was never completed, and the man's levitation-hold was broken. The stone plunged downward, and Willen grabbed wildly. A hundred and fifty feet below, stone and wizard thudded onto the downward slope as Willen Ironmaul, belly-down on the ledge wall, clung to the wrist of a flailing, kicking lorekeeper.

With a heave, the big Hylar pulled Quill to safety and stared at him in disbelief. "Are you a complete fool?" he demanded. "Jumping out onto the floating stone was ..."

"Stones don't float." Quill glared at his chief. "It's just as Damon said. Magic exists, but it isn't real."

"And that stone wasn't up here, floating in the air with people riding on it?"

"Of course not. Stones don't do that."

"Then what kind of imbecile jumps onto a stone that *doesn't* float, a hundred and fifty feet up in the air?"

"That's the point," Quill started, then went pale above his whiskers. "Oh. Uh, well ..." He stood on tiptoes to look over the wall at the slope below. There, straight down, were the fragments of the fallen stone and the crushed bodies of three human mercenaries and a wizard. "Gods!" Quill muttered.

All along the ramparts, guards were watching for more floating stones, but no others appeared.

"We count at least two dozen unarmed humans down there," a spotter reported. "We assume they're wizards. But they are scattered all over. The only group we see is down past the bluff. Six of them ... no, seven now ... have gotten together. They are arguing or something. They ... Uh-oh!"

"What?" Willen turned.

"That group of wizards." A dwarf with a lens tube pointed. "They were right down there. Then they all said something together, and they just disappeared."

Above the heads of the dwarves, the air seemed to crackle for an instant, and a Theiwar guard turned toward the gate. “They’ve gotten inside,” he said. “Somehow, they’ve transported themselves past us. They are in Thorbardin.”

Behind the ledge, beyond the huge gate, there were shouts and the sounds of pounding feet, then the unmistakable rattle of missiles flying from murder holes within the great chamber of Anvil’s Echo. Moments passed, and dwarves ran from the open gate, waving excitedly. “There are humans in the main tunnel!” the first one reported. “We don’t know how they got there. They just ... just suddenly appeared.”

“How many?” Barek Stone demanded.

“Ah ...” The new arrivals glanced at one another, whispered together, and the first one said, “Seven, we think. At least there were. Three of them appeared on the catwalk. The other four were just beyond. The three on the catwalk are dead now, but the other four vanished again, and we don’t know where they are.”

“Inside,” Willen muttered.

More dwarves were pouring out from Southgate now—hundreds of them, as though fleeing for their lives.

“What are you people doing?” Barek Stone demanded. “Where are you going?”

“Out here,” a Daewar said. “Gem Bluesleeve’s orders. He said if any humans got in, past the gate and the catwalk, then everybody in the gatehouse was to get outside.”

From the great, gaping gateway came an ominous rumbling sound, like the turning of a gigantic screw within sockets. A last few dwarves scampered from the opening, and the massive gate-plug drove itself into place just behind them, sealing the gate with a solid wall of steel-clad stone. The *chunk* of its closing had a hollow, final sound.

“Well, that does it,” Willen muttered. “Damon said to trust Gem Bluesleeve. I guess now we have no choice.”

The sight of the great gate closing drew stares all along the upper and lower slopes, and the fighting there renewed itself as howling gangs of humans surged forward against the advancing dwarves.

Within a minute, fierce hand-to-hand conflict raged all along the swale below the ramparts and out onto the slopes on either side.

On the eastern embankments, a battalion of masked Daergar massed a charge at a rank of human fighters, hitting them so fiercely that they went all the way through the line, then found themselves cut off from retreat as the humans closed in behind them. For long moments it was a standoff—the humans battered and bloody, hesitating to subject themselves again to such ferocity, while the steel-masked dwarves formed a tight ring and waited for the attack. Then from the ring a square, burly dwarf with massive wrists stepped forward, holding a bloody miner's pick.

Pyrr Steelpick, boss of the shafts, was thoroughly exasperated with the entire situation. Pointing a blunt finger at the nearest humans, he shouted, "What do you people think you're doing here? Why don't you go home where you belong?"

The challenge was so unexpected that the humans just stared at him, and some started laughing.

"Well," the irritated miner demanded, "why are you here?"

"For money, dink," a tall warrior shouted back. "We fight for hire."

"What kind of money?" Pyrr goaded the man. "Rocks?"

"Good coin, dink!" the man said. He pulled forth a shiny coin and held it high. "This kind of money!"

"That's nothing but a pebble!" the Daergar jeered.

"Pebble?" The man looked at his coin, frowning. "This is no pebble! This is a bronze hundred-point coin!"

"Do you all have them?"

"Of course we all have them! We don't fight for free!"

Scowling behind his mask, Pyrr pointed his pick toward a dead human lying almost at the man's feet. "Does he have coins like that? Take a look at them!"

Curious, and glad for the chance to regain his breath before fighting dwarves again, the man crouched beside the fallen body and withdrew a pouch from the dead man's tunic. "Here they are," he said. "See, we all have ..."

He had opened the pouch, and upended it. The men around him stared in disbelief. What fell from the pouch was nothing more than a few pebbles.

“You’ve been swindled,” the dwarf snapped. “Those wizards don’t have any coins. They make stones look like coins, but they’re still only stones. I’ve seen that before. You people have been fighting and dying for pebbles.”

* * * * *

Out on the Promontory, Damon Omenborn and the Roving Guard watched in fascination as the enthroned wizard, Kistilan, floated toward them. The chair in which he sat was an elaborate, ornate high-backed thing, encrusted with gems and bits of bright metal. The wizard was a large man, his features shadowed by a wide, dark hat. When he was a hundred feet away, the chair settled to a position a dozen feet above the ground, and Kistilan gazed at the armed dwarves and their sleeping captives. “Fools,” he muttered. “Overcome by simple dwarves!”

“Speak up, spell-crafter!” the nearest dwarf demanded. “I can’t hear you.”

Kistilan fixed his gaze on the speaker—a powerfully built, brightly armored creature slightly larger than most dwarves he had seen. But still only a dwarf. Casually, the wizard muttered a spell and pointed his finger at the insolent creature. But even as he did, the dwarf turned his wide shield, displaying its concave backside. The spell lashed out as a thunderbolt and reflected directly back at Kistilan. The mage stiffened, gasped, and glowed with a greenish light as little lightnings crackled around him. It was over in a second, but he found himself gasping for breath. He glared at the dwarf and snapped, “So that’s what you did earlier? Mirrors? How did you learn that?”

“I have been studying sorcerers,” the dwarf said with a scowl of disgust, as though admitting that he had been mired in manure.

Kistilan’s eyes narrowed. “So you’re the one! Sigamon said a dwarf killed Tantas. That was you.”

“Tantas?” Damon hesitated. “Oh, yes. That one. An evil man. I defended myself against him.”

Kistilan glared at the dwarf. “And now you are interfering with others of my company. How have you brought these ... No, never mind how. *Why* have you brought these brothers of sorcery out here to this place?”

“It was the only way I could think of to lure you out here,” Damon told him honestly. “It worked. You’re here.”

“So I am.” The wizard glared at him. “So, what do you want with me?”

“To get rid of you, once and for all,” Damon said. “Will you leave these lands?”

“You ...” Kistilan hesitated in disbelief. “You think you can threaten me?”

“I just did,” Damon pointed out. “Will you leave, or will you die?”

“You arrogant runt!” the wizard roared. “*Des domenet bes! Cha ...!*”

“*Kapach!*” Damon shouted.

“... *pak!*” the wizard finished, then gasped as a winged thing with enormous teeth and claws plummeted toward him, coming out of nowhere. “*Kapach deset!*” he hissed. The winged thing faded into smoke, but blood ran from scratches on the wizard’s cheek where its claws had reached him.

“Another kind of mirror,” Damon explained.

“Pestilence!” Kistilan shrieked. “Dwarf, you will die for this!” Enraged, he raised a hand, opened his mouth, and tumbled a dozen feet to the hard ground. Damon had held his attention so thoroughly that several soldiers of the Roving Guard were able to get beneath the floating throne. With a climbing hook and line, they had snared the chair and jerked it out from under the wizard.

Kistilan was still recovering from his tumble when a heavy dwarf landed on top of him. With powerful hands, Damon rolled the man over onto his stomach, then straddled his shoulders, raising his hammer. For a second, he hesitated.

The instant’s hesitation was all Kistilan needed. Calling on powers that very few mages had been given, or even knew about, he

summoned darkness and chaos, and hurled it outward from himself.

One instant, Damon was astraddle the fallen wizard. The next, he found himself tumbling through a murky, stifling nothingness, with unseen terrors tearing at him from every side. His hammer was flung away, and he felt his armor being ripped open. With every ounce of will, he rejected the spell, *knowing* with dogged determination that it was only magic. But he had never encountered magic like this. Nothing had prepared Damon for the sheer, brutal, evil power of dark forces unleashed. He felt his ribs beginning to break, his spine twisting, his eyes starting to burn ... and somewhere in his mind a voice said, "Damon! Quickly! Release me!"

"Who—" he tried to ask, but his lungs were being crushed.

"You made me be a horse," the voice urged. "Only you can undo what you have done. Hurry, before you die!"

Damon felt his mind growing dim. Nothing seemed to make any sense, and he realized that he had stopped breathing. But there was something he needed to do. Something, but what?

"Hurry!" the mind voice urged. "Reverse your spell, and I will try to help you! You know how!"

Faintly, Damon remembered a word. The mirror word. "*K ... Kapach*," he whispered, as the world went dim and his mind closed its gates. Thorbardin, he thought, feebly. Everbardin, receive this one.... And then there was nothing.

Kistilan got to his feet, backing away from the struggling, gasping dwarf who lay now where he had fallen. Above and around the twitching body, a darkness seemed to hover—a busy darkness full of shrieking, tearing things that were hard to see. Grimly, the wizard concentrated, increasing the power of his torment-death spell. A human would have been dead by now, he thought, yet still the dwarf struggled.

A thrown hammer whisked past the wizard's face, and he glanced about. The other dwarves were all around him, rushing to attack. Quickly he shielded himself, then resumed his concentration. Hammers and blades drummed at his sorcerer's screen, some of them nearly reaching him, but he ignored them and increased the intensity of his concentration. It seemed a shadow passed above

him, and he heard hooves on the stony ground, but did not turn. There was nothing they could do to him. With fierce willpower, he pressed the spell.

Abruptly, his shield of power seemed to implode upon him, knocking him sprawling. A spinning hammer flashed just above his nose, and he tried desperately to recreate his shield. But it faltered and shredded around him, and he realized that there was another magic at work here.

He looked up. Nearby, just beyond the ring of angry dwarves around him, were two men ... a powerful-looking Cobar nomad, and another one he recognized instantly. Megistal.

Even as Kistilan realized who it was, Megistal's hands moved gracefully, and a tangle of thorny vines grew around Kistilan, twining around his legs, around his chest and down his arms, twisting tendrils mingling with his whiskers, clawing at his face.

With a curse, the dark mage tore himself free and hissed a chant. The waving, weaving vines shriveled and faded. A flung sword embedded itself in the ground between his feet, and he cursed, muttering. All around him, dwarves were thrown backward, tumbling and somersaulting. A dozen unconscious wizards were flung after them, as was the barbarian beside Megistal. In an instant, the knoll was almost clear. Only two wizards and a fallen dwarf remained. Damon lay facedown, not moving.

"Megistal," Kistilan hissed. "So you have come."

"You knew I would," the red-strap said calmly, drawing up the sleeves of his coat. "We have unfinished business between us, Kistilan."

"Your oath to kill me ... if you could." Kistilan nodded. "But you gave another oath, Megistal. To hold all else in abeyance until the mountain tower is complete."

"There will be no tower." Megistal shook his head. "The dwarves have seen to that. Now you must pay for what you did."

"What I did?" Kistilan laughed harshly. "The Scions gave me my powers, Lunitarian, just as they gave you yours. I am favored of the Scions."

“You were,” Megistal admitted. “And of all who learned at their feet, you were the first to betray them. You turned their gifts against them.”

“They refused to give me more!”

“They gave you all they could. Like the rest of us ... the favored ones ... it was up to you to go beyond, if you desired.”

“I did!” Kistilan snapped. “What they wouldn’t give, I took.”

“And the Scions are gone from Krynn now. And I have sworn, in the names of our mentors, that you will die.”

“You haven’t the power that I have!” Kistilan shouted, flinging a spell at the buckskin- and fur-clad man. Brilliant lightnings writhed like serpents around Megistal, twining and striking at him, then diminished. The red-moon sorcerer stood unscathed, smiling faintly. With a hiss of rage, Kistilan drew darknesses around himself like a second cloak, and unleashed them furiously, muttering spell after spell.

Megistal was swallowed up in seething, swirling darkness, where dull red, angry glows danced crazy patterns. Twin vortices of blackness seemed to descend from the skies above and swell from the earth below to envelope him. Then the swirling slowed, went mute, and faded. And only one thing was changed about Megistal. Where the look in his eyes had been a slight sadness, now it was anger.

“The Scions knew you, Kistilan. They predicted there would be corrupters, and they knew you would be the first. The elemental powers are not to be invoked; they are only to be studied. They threaten the very fabric of existence on this world.”

“I am favored of the Scions!” Kistilan raged. “I alone am favored of the powers!”

“You, alone?” Megistal asked sarcastically. “There were twenty-one of us so honored.”

“There were,” Kistilan sneered. “But I found the others. You are the last of the rest.”

“So I had feared.” Megistal nodded.

“You are the last of the rest!” Kistilan repeated. “Do you think I have not gone past the powers? Do you think I hesitate to use

them?" Seething, he hurled flames and lightning bolts from his fingertips.

Megistal was forced backward by the sheer might of the evil magic pounding at his shields. He had expected elemental forces, but had not thought that Kistilan could have so corrupted them. They were now something new and implacable. Megistal tried to counterattack with spells of his own, but the intensity of the black-robe's magic buffeted him. It was inconceivable that so much power could be unleashed by one man, and yet it was, and the dark wizard increased its concentration second by second.

Kistilan was at the limit of his strength, drawing upon the pure hatreds that lived within him to give force to his spells. He concentrated, amplified, and regenerated the powers striking from his fingers and saw the red-moon mage begin to crumple. Then, suddenly, the magic was broken, and Kistilan found himself lying facedown on the hard ground. Something had kicked his feet out from under him. He turned his head and looked up at the angriest face he had ever seen.

Damon Omenborn, still hurt and shaken from the torments of magic, stood over the fallen wizard, glaring at him.

"You dare ..."

Damon kicked the wizard solidly in the ribs. "I dare," he growled. "That man there"—he pointed at Megistal—"I have despised, because he is a wizard. Because he uses magic. But he is not an evil man. I see that now. He is a mage, but nothing like you. He isn't evil. You are!" Stooping, the dwarf grasped the man's lapels and lifted him as a child might lift an oversized rag doll. The mage spat, hissed, and started to mutter, and a hard dwarven hand slapped him so hard his teeth clicked together.

The wizard's eyes went wild, and his hand pointed at the dwarf. A hard glare lashed out at Damon and ended abruptly as a human arrow—a Cobar arrow—pierced Kistilan's hand. Then Megistal shouted something that was in no language at all.

Kistilan's eyes opened wide, and he gasped. To Damon, it seemed that he abruptly became as light as a feather, and the dwarf clung more tightly to the fabric of the man's cloak. But the fabric thinned,

became like smoke, and parted in his hand. Kistilan whimpered, and Damon realized abruptly that he could see right through the man's head.

For a moment, Kistilan hung there, gasping, fading away. Then he was gone, and Damon stood alone with an empty fist. A hand came from somewhere to rest on his shoulder.

Damon half-turned, looking up at the sad face of a disillusioned wizard. "You had such power all along?" he asked.

"I had it," Megistal admitted.

"Then, all those times ... out there, and in the valley ... you could have killed me. You could have killed us all."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Why didn't you?"

"You were right in what you told Kistilan," the mage admitted. "I am—by your views—a vile thing, a magic-user. But I am not evil, Damon. Many of us are not."

"Favored of the powers," Damon muttered. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I have a burden to bear, that I hope no other man must ever have. My conscience must always be stronger than the powers I was given."

Others of the Roving Guard had recovered now and were trudging toward them. Among them, surrounded, pushed, and in some cases dragged by grim dwarves, were the remaining captive wizards and the Cobar, Quist Redfeather.

Damon looked up at Megistal, frowning. "Will this *conscience* of yours permit you to leave Kal-Thax and not come back?"

"I don't see why not." The wizard shrugged, an ironic smile touching his cheeks. "I have no further business here."

"Good!" Damon said. He pointed at the battered humans being brought forward by his guards. "And take these with you."

"Goodbye, Damon Omenborn." Megistal lifted a hand in farewell. "I have truly learned from you." The big wizard muttered, and the air seemed to crackle. Then he was gone, as were the other captured wizards. Only the dour Cobar remained in the midst of the dwarven guards.

“Wait a minute!” Damon shouted into empty air. “Take the Cobar, too!”

From somewhere—from everywhere and nowhere—a chuckling voice responded. “He is your problem, Damon, not mine. You still owe him a horse.”

“My problem,” Damon growled. He glared at the human warrior, who glared right back at him fiercely. Then Damon looked northward, toward Thorbardin, and his heart went cold. On the slopes, armies still fought, but above them the massive face of Southgate was blank metal. The plug was closed. It could mean only one thing. Enemies had penetrated the defenses and were now inside.

“Bring him along,” Damon commanded, pointing at the human.



21

The Breath of Reorx

It was Porcirin the Pure who led the penetration of Thorbardin.

A native of faraway Istar, Porcirin was not well liked among the brothers of the Orders of High Sorcery. With his Istarian attitude of self-righteous single-mindedness, the self-proclaimed “Wearer of the Whitest Robe” was considered by many wizards to be a hypocrite, and by some to be a lunatic. He was not of the highest levels of sorcery, having failed two of the three tests of the Scions. He was not trustworthy, he rarely followed the orders of his superiors unless they just happened to suit him, and—in true Istarian fashion—he was something of a fanatic. Still, Porcirin had a talent for debate and a passion for purpose ... and followers who would bend to his will.

With the departure of Kistilan the Dark from the assault on the dwarven stronghold, and the resultant confusion of the besieging forces, Porcirin had decided that the human-wave assault on the gate was a waste of time, and that there was a better way to recover the Stone of Threes, which was somewhere inside the undermountain fortress. It did not require an army to go and find it, despite Kistilan’s ambitions. Any three sorcerers, providing they were practitioners of the three orientations of magic, could locate the Stone of Threes if they could get close enough to sense its presence.

So, with half the company of wizards missing, and Kistilan the Dark gone off somewhere, Porcirin took matters into his own hands. Calling a number of others together, he pointed at the great, open gate on the mountainside above and said, “The time is at hand. Who

will follow me into the lair of the dwarves to recover that which is ours?”

Some turned away, and some simply glared at him, but six among them were persuaded. The task would be simple, Porcirin assured them. The seven would transport themselves—a short distance only, just through the gate and far enough past it to be beyond any simple inner defenses the dwarves might have—then make themselves invisible and go in search of their tower stone. When they found it, they would take it by whatever means were necessary and return to the outside, to resume the task of creating a Tower of High Sorcery in the Kharolis Mountains.

All seven of them knew transport spells, so, gazing up at the big open gate in the mountain’s face, they said their incantations, more or less in unison.

As Porcirin materialized in a wide, high-ceilinged tunnel that was surprisingly well lighted, he heard screams behind him. He turned quickly, fighting down the brief nausea of transport. Three of his followers were with him, but the other three were some distance behind in the midst of a huge vaulted area traversed from end to end by a narrow catwalk. Two of the laggards were on the catwalk, clinging in terror. The third was dangling from its rail, screaming and flailing. Even as Porcirin and the three wizards with him glanced back, hundreds of missiles of various kinds flew from holes in the walls of the vaulted chamber, striking the other three with deadly accuracy.

It was over in a second. The clinging wizard fell screaming from sight, pierced through by a javelin. The other two stood for an instant, then were toppled by whistling balls of gray iron. They fell from the precarious walkway and disappeared into unseen depths below.

And all around Porcirin and the other survivors, armed dwarves were closing in. “Second spell,” Porcirin commanded, then muttered it, ducking as a thrown hammer flashed past his head.

In an instant, the three were shielded by invisibility and hurried forward, to escape before the advancing dwarves closed around them.

“There they go,” a dwarf shouted. “It’s true, you can still see their eyes. Look for their eyes!”

There seemed to be hundreds of dwarves on all sides, and one of them—a short, wide-shouldered creature—pointed directly at Porcirin. “Here’s one!” the dwarf shouted and lunged at the wizard, lashing out with a dark-steel sword. In panic, Porcirin shut his eyes, ducked, dived to the side, and rolled. He heard the dwarf’s sword ring against stone just behind him. He rolled again and opened his eyes for an instant as someone very short and very solid fell over him.

“I found one!” a voice called. “Oh, rust. Now where did he go?”

Not far away, drums sounded a complex tattoo, and several dwarves shouted. “That’s the signal. Everybody back. Hurry!” Running feet sounded, echoing through the big tunnel, and Porcirin opened his eyes just a crack to see what was going on. Dwarves were streaming past him on both sides, running along the tunnel, deeper into the mountain. A pair of them ran into him, flipped over him and rolled. One of them turned back, raising a hammer. But the second grabbed him and pulled him away. “No time for that!” he shouted. “You heard the orders as well as I did. Come on!”

They ran, and others swarmed after them. Within moments the corridor around the wizards was empty. Porcirin sat up, looked around, and said, “Saritus? Kryxan? Lonex?”

“Here,” three voices answered.

“What was that all about?” one continued.

“They could see our eyes,” another growled. “Why didn’t somebody tell me that an invisibility spell doesn’t hide a person’s eyes?”

“I meant, why did they all run away?” the first explained.

“I don’t like this,” a third voice grumbled. “I don’t like this at all.”

“Shut up!” Porcirin snapped. “It doesn’t matter why they ran. We’re inside their fortress now. Let’s look for our ...”

A short distance away, steel clanged against stone as a heavy, barred portcullis dropped across the tunnel, blocking the route toward the catwalk and the gateway beyond. In the distance, the light from the gateway dimmed as creaking sounds erupted, like a

great screw turning in steel collars. Dropping their invisibility spells, the wizards got to their feet and sprinted back the way they had come, as far as the barred portcullis. Just beyond was the huge, vaulted chamber with the catwalk through its center and the murder holes in the walls. Now those murder holes were disappearing with a staccato series of clangs and clicks as covers were sealed over them from beyond the walls. In the distance, past the outer end of the vaulted cavern, the glare of light from outside diminished and then vanished as a monstrous gate closed, sealing the exit of the fortress.

“What is this?” Kryxan snarled. “A trap?”

“Well, if it is, it has only one side,” Porcirin pointed out, turning. Northward, into the depths of the mountain, the wide tunnel ran with no sign of blockades. “Come on,” he said. “We were going in that direction, anyway.”

The four hurried along the tunnel, gaping around them at the sheer immensity of the undermountain excavation with its high ceilings and, at intervals, circles of bright light that flooded the area below. Beneath one of these, Saritius stopped for a moment, staring upward. “It’s the sky,” he said. “I can see the sky through that thing.”

They went a hundred yards, then another hundred, and ahead of them they saw a place where the tunnel widened, a sort of great hall with a low, circular wall of set stones in the middle of it. Beyond, in the distance, the tunnel resumed its usual size and continued onward. It looked as though it ran for miles.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Lonex marveled. “It’s unbelievable that simple dwarves could build something like this.”

“Shut up and pay attention,” Porcirin snapped. “We’re here to find the Stone of Threes. Do any of you sense its presence?”

They shook their heads. “Not a thing, yet,” Saritius said.

As they approached the wide cavern with its walled circle, the air seemed to grow warmer with each step. “They have some kind of stove in here,” Porcirin decided. Curiously, he approached the low, circular wall and peered over it, then froze, staring downward. Within the wall was a sheer-sided pit of immense proportions, a

huge round hole that went straight down ... and down, and down into dizzying depths as though it pierced right through the world itself. Far away, down there, was a tiny glow of intense brightness. And from the pit rose air so hot that it seemed to come from an oven.

“What ... what is it?” Saritius wondered.

“This hole is *deep!*” Kryxan marveled.

Porcirin started to respond, then stopped as sounds brought his head up. Beyond the walled pit, beyond the wide cavern, there were dwarves in the northward tunnel—busy, bustling dwarves drawing great, fabric curtains across the opening.

* * * * *

Olim Goldbuckle had staked his reputation as Prince of the Daewar on the ability of his best delvers to complete a tunnel under water. Slide Tolec had, in turn, staked the honor of the thane of Theiwar on his boatmen overcoming their natural tendency to drown a few “gold-molders” if they had the chance, and instead to submerge and retrieve the Daewar delvers unharmed. Vog Ironface had promised the new regent of Thorbardin—the chief of chiefs—that his Daergar mine workers could install a hinged plug over the abandoned Hylar heat-exchange vent in the Shaft of Reorx, and have it done before it was needed. And Pakka Trune had given his word that his Klar craftsmen could produce and weave enough rock wool, or “spunstone,” in their fiber-lofts adjoining the worm warren, to seal the width and height of the Southgate tunnel with a thick curtain of heavy woven stone.

The chiefs had given their pledges, and Willen Ironmaul had given Gem Bluesleeve permission to proceed with his plan.

Now all the pledges had been fulfilled, except one. The Daewar diving delvers had done their job, and a new tunnel now connected the bottom of the Urkhan Sea to the abandoned shaft leading to the Shaft of Reorx. True, there were now new grudges to be resolved. Daewar delvers angrily accused Theiwar boatmen of trying to drown them and, even worse, of laughing at them when they were finally pulled up from the sea, coughing, spitting, and soaked. And Theiwar

boatmen in turn accused the delvers of endangering their crafts by attacking their “saviors” as soon as they had their breath. Daergar lid-setters, scorched and blistered from their exposure to the Shaft of Reorx, accused the Klar of providing inadequate insulation in their spunstone garments, and a committee of Klar weavers was petitioning the Council of Thaners for new looms, to replace those crushed by tractor worms attracted to the spunstone fibers.

But the tasks were done, and now the entire responsibility for the enterprise rested on the sturdy but nervous shoulders of Gem Bluesleeve, whose idea the whole thing had been.

“If this doesn’t work,” the warden of the watch told himself when the first signal came that wizards had penetrated Southgate, “I’ll never be able to show my face again in Thorbardin.” Then, on second thought, he amended the statement. “If this doesn’t work, I’ll never get out of Thorbardin alive, face or not.”

As the last of the spunstone drapery was hung from its curved rod running along the ceiling of the Southgate Road, Gem told himself, “Even if it does work, every smelter-smith in Thorbardin is going to be after me if I damage the magma pit.

“I should have kept my mouth shut,” the Daewar warrior told himself. “I should have been content just to be a soldier, not an inventor.”

As the final lift-lines were laid, from the Shaft of Reorx to hewn shelters behind the curtain rods, Gem told himself, “It’s all Willen Ironmaul’s fault, really. He’s the one who insisted that every tool must double as a weapon. And if the Shaft of Reorx isn’t a tool, what is?”

Clamors echoed along the wide way, from the reaches beyond the Shaft toward Anvil’s Echo and Southgate, then the drums sounded and hundreds of dwarves came streaming past, vacating the outer roadway. They were acting as he had ordered, and he had his guards hurry them on, getting them well clear of the waiting spunstone curtain. He wasn’t at all sure what was going to happen when the curtain was closed and the lid-lines were pulled, but he knew the open tunnel would be no place for any dwarf to be.

“If I had this to do again,” Gem assured himself, “I wouldn’t think of it at all. This is entirely the fault of those Aghar. If they hadn’t decided to dump their chamber pots in the Shaft of Reorx ...”

Then there was no time for further recriminations. The outer tunnel was clear and vacated, except for four tall figures coming toward him, approaching the great shaft with its “Temple of Stars” lens above it. Wizards. Human wizards, inside Thorbardin.

“Close the curtains,” Gem Bluesleeve commanded and lent a hand as dozens of his own guard labored to draw the heavy fabric along its curved ceiling rod, while others attached its trailing edges to stone rings below. Within moments, the entire tunnel was sealed off by heavy, dense fabric woven from the fibers of tractor worm nests—fibers that were drawn from stone by the worms and woven by the Klar who worked the worm warrens. It was the same fabric that the Daergar used for insulated garb in their brimstone pit-mines, and smelter-men wore from head to toe in their furnace coves. Better than anything else the dwarves had discovered, spunstone shielded against extreme heat.

Through a flap, Gem looked out into the great concourse. Three of the four wizards were coming toward the curtain. The fourth was still standing beside the ring-wall of the great shaft, staring upward in amazement at the convex lens called the Temple of the Stars.

The warden of the watch sighed. It was time to test his theory. “Reorx be with us,” he muttered and picked up one of the lid-lines. Around him, his guards picked up others.

“Pull!” Gem Bluesleeve shouted.

The lines came taut, and the dwarves leaned into them. A hundred yards away, beyond the spunstone screen, cable scraped and sang at the lip of the Shaft of Reorx, and far below in the shaft’s north wall hinges creaked and a heavy, metal cap slid open. From the wide hole behind it, water shot out, a great stream of water six feet wide and driven by the weight of three fathoms of Urkhan Sea.

The wizard beside the pit glanced downward and stared in disbelief. Far below him, thousands upon thousands of gallons of water were spewing from the shaft’s wall, plummeting downward toward the impossibly distant speck of glare below.

A great roar arose from the open shaft, and the other three wizards, who had almost reached the spunstone screen, turned to look back.

For a long moment there was nothing to see except the laggard Kryxan leaning over the wall of the deep shaft, staring downward. The roar grew, and other, deeper roars joined it.

“See what that is!” Porcirin demanded.

“It’s water!” Kryxan called. “A lot of water, falling into this hole. This thing has sprung a leak!”

The roars grew as the great tumult of water fell downward and downward, deeper and deeper into the shaft, falling toward the open pit of pure magma a half mile below.

Then the roars became a bellow as huge, dense clouds of hot vapor shot upward, filling the shaft, exploding above the walled rim and expanding. The wizards screamed, tore at their throats as hot mists scalded them, then sagged and fell as the vapors were pushed aside by a huge, thundering gout of pure, live steam shooting from the Shaft of Reorx. In an instant the entire concourse, from the Southgate plug to the whipping, drumming spunstone screen, was filled with superheated steam. Even the spunstone screen did not stop all the heat. Behind it, Gem and the others dived for their hewn shelters and pulled thick layers of stoneweave over themselves.

Half a mile away, in Anvil’s Echo, the great vaulted chamber filled with steam and vapors, and dwarves behind their sealed murder holes abandoned their posts and raced for cooler places.

“That’s enough!” Gem Bluesleeve hissed. “Reverse the lines!” Red-faced and gasping, scalded even behind their protective screen, dwarves dropped the lid-lines and pulled desperately on others to close the lid on the waterfall within the Shaft of Reorx. The roar diminished slowly, though the rumble of expanding steam continued for several minutes.

Gem waited nearly an hour before chancing a glance through the screen’s flap. Beyond, vapors rolled along the ceiling of the concourse, and the floor was awash in foot-deep water, slowly draining away into the lower levels of Anvil’s Echo.

“What a mess!” a dwarf beside the warden of the watch said. “Where are the wizards?”

At first, they saw no sign of the four intruding humans. But then, as the condensing vapors receded and the waters lowered, they saw four indistinct lumps on the floor. Opening the curtain at one end, Gem and a few others waded out into the concourse and paused to stare at what was left of the wizards. It was not dwarven nature to have weak stomachs, but some of them turned away quickly. None of them had ever before seen what live steam can do to living flesh.

“I expected to see steamed wizards,” a young guard muttered, pale and shaken. “This is just bones and slop.”

Gem Bluesleeve waded across to the Shaft of Reorx. No water had actually reached the magma, of course. The heat halfway down the shaft had been intense enough to vaporize any liquid. But a great deal of energy had been expended in converting water to steam, and now the “eye” of the magma pit far below glowed smoky red.

“Breath of Reorx,” Gem sighed. “There will be some who will want to draw and quarter me for this.”

* * * * *

On the slope below Southgate, the battle had continued, far more fiercely now that most of the human mercenaries were without wizards to give them illusions, and many were thoroughly disappointed as word spread that the coins they had received—and those promised—were not coins at all but simply spell-changed pebbles. As with most humans, the hired warriors were willing to accept magic as part of their world, but when it came to money they wanted true, hard coinage cast in honest foundries and stamped by real molds.

To make things worse for the marauders, it was plain to see that the great gate above them was closed, and even if they made it that far, getting through it would be impossible. In the meantime, the dwarves pressed the battle with renewed vigor, and more and more of their engines came into play as the field spread and scattered. The big discobel still thundered now and then, its great, whirring disks of death cutting through everything in their path. Also, the

dwarves were using dozens of catapults and assorted flingers, now that the ramparts were clear. All sorts of mischief fell among the humans as these engines did their work. The most dangerous missiles were loads of iron rubble, and great baskets of discard from forges and foundries. These odds and ends of metal screamed and whined through ranks of marauders, cutting them down by the dozens. But the most disconcerting were little canisters of bronze that left a trail of smoke behind them as they arced through the air, then exploded with a bang, throwing bits of bronze in all directions. Everywhere one of these exploded, there were clouds of white smoke that smelled like rotten eggs.

Still, the humans continued their fight, until—abruptly—little fissures and crevices all along the lower slopes began spouting great clouds of hot steam. From every crack and pore in the mountain, it seemed, steam hissed forth directly into the faces of the humans in the lines.

It was more than reasonable mercenaries—no longer bound by magic—could be expected to tolerate. Within minutes, most of the attacking bands had turned and were in full flight, scattering toward the Promontory and points beyond. Cohorts and companies of dwarves raged after them, sweeping the field, but by the time the sun of Krynn sat upon the Anviltops to the west, there was no one left for the dwarves to fight. With their longer legs, the surviving humans had outrun their pursuers and had not turned back.

It would be estimated by human chroniclers that more than four thousand of the human horde survived the attack upon Thorbardin. In the scrolls of Quill Runebrand, the number would be set at two thousand, seven hundred ... human losses of more than four thousand, against two thousand, one hundred and thirty-four dwarves who would not see tomorrow's sun through the sun-tunnels. There would be great mourning in Thorbardin, and the grief would last a long, long time. But what mattered most was that fortress Thorbardin, almost ninety-one years after its inception, had endured its first full-scale test as a fortification and had stood firm. Old Kal-Thax remained intact, the realm of Thorbardin was tempered by blood and steel, and its people were—as they had

always been—the bonded thanes and scattered Einar of the dwarven race.

When Southgate was reopened, and the bloodied but victorious hosts of Thorbardin returned to their homes, Willen Ironmaul immediately called a Council of Thanes and laid his hammer upon the table. “I am no longer chief of chiefs,” he said. “I have done what I had to do, but if you still want someone to be in charge of all of Thorbardin, get someone else. I will lead the Hylar. But I will never again try to lead all the thanes.”

Damon Omenborn turned his Cobar captive over to the Gateway guards and went with his father to the council. As soon as he could, though, he hurried away in search of Willow Summercloud. He expected to find her at Hybardin, where he had left her, but no one there had seen the Einar girl recently.

“She’s around somewhere,” Tera Sharn assured her son. “Did you know she has a kender girl tagging after her? A lot of people aren’t too happy about that, but no one knows exactly what to do about it. Personally, I think the little thing is kind of cute.”

Damon roamed the markets and the concourses, searching, but there was no sign of Willow anywhere. Then he came across Quill Runebrand. “Your village girl?” The lorekeeper blinked. “I don’t know, but I saw her yesterday. For several days she has been complaining about fog in the north warren, telling everyone she can find to tell. Of course, everybody has been busy, and no one paid much attention. But yesterday she was here again, her and that pesky little kender, complaining about the fog....”

“Fog?” Damon frowned, feeling a cold intuition creep up his spine.

“Fog,” Quill repeated, shrugging.

“What kind of fog?” Damon asked.

“Cold fog.” The lorekeeper tipped his head. “She gave up on telling people about it though. At least, I guess she did. When I last saw her, she said she would take care of it by herself.”



22

Rage Within

With the closing of Northgate and the calling of reserve companies to arms, the entire north sector of Thorbardin was nearly deserted. In Gatekeep, behind the north Anvil's Echo, a few families remained—mostly stone-cutters and their wives and children, and a few shop keepers. Long before the Wizards' War, Bell Brightluster, Thorbardin's warden of trade, had devised a plan to convert the cold shaft called Shame of Reorx into wells and storage lofts for oils, grains, and other goods gained in trade with the outside. Those crafters who remained in Gatekeep now were at work on the pit, replacing its walls with a grid-work structure from which nets and lines could be suspended for construction of an auger lift. A dozen or so guards remained with them, and the gate crew from Northgate's gatehouse.

Just to the east and a few levels down, the north farming warren was nearly empty. A few Theiwar came from Theibardin now and then to look at the crops, but the growing season was well along, and there was little to be done there until the harvests began. The temporary Einar camps, for the refugees from the assault, had been moved past Theibardin to the shore of the Urkhan Sea, where water was plentiful, and shops and bakeries were numerous.

Thus the north end of Thorbardin, usually as busy and bustling as any other sector of the dwarven citadel, was nearly vacant for the time being. Almost thirty square miles of caverns north of Theibardin and Theibolden were, for all intents and purposes, deserted.

But it was to these sectors that Willow Summercloud came, with Shill Quickfoot tagging happily after her. Willow was, for the

moment, thoroughly exasperated with Holgar dwarves in general. A dozen times she had tried to sound the alarm that something was wrong in the north warren. A dozen times she had collared guards, craftsmen, and even an entire platoon of Theiwar reserves on their way to Southgate and tried to tell them about the fog seeping into the warren and what it might mean.

And no one had paid any attention. Everyone was busy, preoccupied with the War of the Wizards going on beyond Southgate. A few had listened politely, especially some of the younger males, and several had informed her—patronizingly in some cases—that Thorbardin was well secured and that an outsider could not be expected to realize just how thoroughly defended it was.

Two or three of the young males had offered to show her around ... after the war was over. One had even offered to take her home with him ... after the war was done.

Many people, here in this smug, snug hole beneath a mountain, seemed not even to have heard of the killing beast that had ravaged Einar villages in the outside world. And even those who had heard the tale saw no connection between that and the cold fog creeping into the north warren. The beast was gone, they assured her. It had been driven away, or something.

She wished that Damon were with her. He, at least, had been there, had seen what the creature did to her own village. He had helped in the search for the thing. But Damon was far away, occupied with the fighting beyond Southgate, as was everyone else who might know about the fog creature.

Willen Ironmaul, the chief of chiefs, was away dealing with the war. All of his senior officers were with him. All the other thane chieftains were away, as well, occupied with various things, and even the wardens could not be found.

“What this place needs is a king,” Willow fumed. “As it is now, there isn’t *anybody* in charge.”

It occurred to her to try one more time, to go to Hybardin and tell Tera Sharn what she feared. But by then she was already on her way through Theibardin, heading for the warren. Shillitec Medina

Quickfoot skipped along behind her, lugging a fat pouch that had seemed to grow larger and larger each day since her arrival in Thorbardin. Carrying her axe, the Einar girl headed for the Fifth Road that led north toward the warren a mile away. As she rounded a bend, a voice called, "Well, hello there!" She turned. A few feet away, just stepping out of a side route, was a long-armed young Theiwar in battle armor and cloak. He wore a shield at his back, had a curved, dark-steel blade slung at his side, and the mesh faceplate of his helm almost covered his features. As she stared at him, he removed the helm and grinned. She remembered him then. It was Tag Salan, who had been with Damon at Sheercliff, and had accompanied them back to Thorbardin.

"I see you've found some nice clothes," he said. "Wow! Does Damon know what a lucky guy he is? You're really ..." His admiring gaze shifted, and his eyes widened. "You still have that kender," he said.

"Hello," Shill chirped brightly. "I think I remember you. Of course, as my Aunt Pathtoe says, when you've seen one dwarf, you've seen them all. But that isn't really right. You were out there when we met those wizards, weren't you? I'm glad your beard has grown back."

"How did she get into Thorbardin?" Tag asked Willow. "Kender don't usually get past the gates."

"I just walked in." Shill giggled. "A lot of people were coming in, so I ..."

"Maybe *you* will listen to me," Willow Summercloud said. "So far, nobody has."

"Listen about what?" Tag asked.

"About the fog-thing. The creature that destroyed Windhollow. You were there. You saw what it did."

"I sure did," the Theiwar assured her grimly. "And I saw where it came from, too. I found its lair. Damon is right, you know. I'm sure those wizards woke that thing up. But I heard it got away, that it's gone."

"It isn't gone!" Willow said. "I think it's here."

"Here?" Tag's hand went to his blade. "In Thorbardin?"

“Or trying to get in,” she said. “You see, I was looking around, and there was fog coming in, seeping through cracks in the stone behind a terrace. It was cold fog, like the fog that creature brought with it to Windhollow.”

“Cracks?” Tag shook his head. “In Thorbardin? There aren’t any cracks that I know of. Nothing could get in here, though. Not even wizards. They tried it and failed. And even if something did get in, everybody would know about it. There are only two entrances, and they’re always guarded.”

“There aren’t any guards where I was,” Willow pointed out. “There isn’t anybody there. Everybody is gone.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “I guess everyone has been off fighting wizards. That’s where I’ve been. But the war is over now. We beat the wizards and their troops. Didn’t Damon tell you?”

“I haven’t seen Damon,” she said.

“Well, he’s probably looking for you. He talks about you all the time. You should have seen him out there, dealing with those wizards! I swear, I don’t think anybody or anything can beat Damon Omenborn, once he gets mad.”

“I can imagine,” Willow breathed. Then she shook her head. “But what about the fog? What should we do?”

“It’s probably just fog.” Tag shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s go find Damon and ...”

“You go find him,” she snapped. “I have things to do.”

Before he could reply, the girl was gone. There was no sign of her, or of the little kender either. He started toward the Fifth Road crossing and stopped as a commotion erupted just across the way.

“Get that creature out of here!” someone bellowed. “Thief! Thief!”

Loosing his sword, Tag ran to the row of stalls across the wide thoroughfare and skidded to a stop. Inside a delved shop, a burly Theiwar with a leather apron was running in circles, swinging a broom. And just ahead of him, ducking from bench to bench, table to table, and cabinet to shelf, Shillitec Medina Quickfoot was dodging, scampering, and shouting taunts back over her shoulder.

“Hold on!” Tag shouted at the shop keeper. “What’s going on here?”

“It’s a kender!” the Theiwar said. “A kender, in my shop! Probably stealing everything it can lay its hands on!”

“There’s nothing here worth stealing,” Shill shrilled at him. “Even if I were a thief, which I’m not, and you’ve no right calling me that! Besides that, you’re ugly!”

Again the shopkeeper gave chase, wielding his broom, and it was all Tag could do to stop him and calm him down. When again he had the merchant’s attention, he said, “I don’t know what you’re worrying about. This is a furniture shop. There isn’t anything in here that a kender could lift, much less steal. What is it you think she took?”

“I don’t know.” The shopkeeper glared at him. “But I know about kender.”

“Reorx have mercy,” Tag sighed. He looked around for Shill and couldn’t find her. Then he thought about starting after Willow again, but didn’t even know where she had been going when he hailed her. Confused and puzzled, he walked along several tunnels, searching, then shook his head. “What do I do now?” he asked himself.

* * * * *

At the entrance to the north warren, Willow felt a chill come over her. A great, hollow stillness lay across the immense cavern. By the light of sun-tunnels she could see the terraces and fields, the segment paths and the irrigation ditches, the granaries and equipment sheds scattered here and there. The north warren was not the largest of Thorbardin’s subterranean farming caverns, but it was the oldest. For more than eighty years, these fields had been worked and their crops harvested. Nearly four square miles of fertile fields, terraces, and vine ledges, the old “First Warren” had been the dwarves’ great experiment with underground farming, and what they had learned here was now practiced in two other main warrens, as well as in the new worm warren where some of the Klar were harvesting edible funguses and several varieties of spices for trade.

The warrens were usually bustling, busy places, but right now the north warren seemed entirely deserted. The silence was unbroken even by the sounds of wind and birdcall which Willow remembered from the Einar fields of Windhollow.

And, she realized, it was cold. In this place of fairly constant temperatures beneath the mountain, she had not felt chill since her arrival. But she felt it now and knew it was not imagination. In the nearest field, there was frost on the ripening melons.

She gazed at the frost, then looked up, startled. For frost to form, there must be mist. And now, looking across the wide warren, she realized that it was foggy. Looking northward, she could not see the far ledges. Though a mile away, they had been clearly visible when she had first entered. Now it was as though a deepening mist were rolling into the warren, obscuring everything in the north quadrants and moving south, toward her.

With a chill in her heart, she hurried on, deeper into the warren. The cold fog was like the fog that had swept down on her village just before the thing within the fog attacked. But the memory also brought a renewed determination, and, clutching her axe tightly, she hurried on.

She was within a hundred yards of the deepening, rolling fog when a low, rumbling hiss broke the eerie silence of the warren. Where the fog rolled beneath a sun-tunnel, filtered light sifted downward, and within the fog something moved—something very large, straightening itself upward, raising its head. With a gasp, Willow dived off the path into the edge of a field of gray-green foliage and crouched there, hidden. The fog seemed to rise before her, roiling upward, then a great, serpentine head rose above it. Fierce silver eyes beneath iron-gray carapace ridges scanned the warren, searching. A long beaklike snout breathed cold fumes, and huge silvery teeth glistened as the thing's mouth opened in a growl.

"Rage," Willow whispered to herself. That was what someone had called the fog-creature. *Rage*. The beast behind that serpentine visage was more than evil, more than cruel and cold. It was rage—killing, raving, icy rage. And it was here, in Thorbardin.

The head gazed around, then lowered again into the enveloping fog as the thing moved forward, coming toward her. Carefully, Willow got to her feet. The thing had raised its head to see what was around it. Therefore, it must be as blinded by the mists that clung to it as was anyone else. In that, it was vulnerable.

With a shiver of resolve, Willow raised her axe, darted directly into the fog, and swung a roundhouse cut at the first thing she saw move. The axe clanged, as though hitting solid stone, and rebounded, throwing her off-balance. She danced to the side, stooping to regain her equilibrium, and something huge—like a wide, half-seen web wing with claws—whisked over her head. Above her, somewhere, the creature snorted, and as she looked up the great evil head materialized in the mists directly over her. With a lunge, she swung her axe over her head, directly into the huge, fanged snout. It was like striking granite, but the thing roared and withdrew for an instant, and the dwarf girl turned and raced away a dozen steps. She was just turning back when she heard a sound to her right, like scythes swishing through ripe grain. By pure instinct, she jumped straight up, and a huge, swatting tail flattened the field plants beneath her.

Again she ran, trying to get past the reach of the thing's tail, and dived and rolled as the tail swept past again, this time going over her, missing her by inches. Even as it passed, she got her feet under her, reversed her direction, and ran directly under the dark shadow that was the creature's body. One more try, she told herself. I have carried this axe since Windhollow, just to cut this thing. I must try one more time.

She ran, dodged, reversed, and charged again, guessing by the movement of shadows within the mist where the various parts of the thing might be. She heard a deep, cold growl just ahead and dodged aside as the great, serpentlike head shot past her, its fangs clicking like stone on stone. As it passed, she turned and swung her axe with all her might. This time it didn't rebound. It hit something very solid, seemed to embed itself there, and was torn from her grasp as the creature roared in pain and fury. Tumbling, dodging, and scampering, Willow ran as she had never run before, while just

behind her the massive creature roared, hissed, and thrashed among ripening fields.

Willow ran until the fog around her had thinned a bit, then slowed to look back. Fifty yards away the deep fogs rolled, and above them was the face of Rage, its slanted silver eyes looking directly at her. It raised its head higher and roared, and for an instant she saw her axe, its blade embedded in the thing's long neck.

Then the head lowered and lunged, the fogs rolled forward, and Willow Summercloud ran for her life as cold mists closed in behind her.

The nearest exit from the warren was the Third Road gate, and Willow headed for it. Like all the warren gates, it was actually two doors—a small door set within a great one. Built of massive timbers, the gates were of Theiwar design. Their purpose was to allow people to go in and out of the warrens without any stray tractor worms following them out. The small doors were adequate for dwarves on foot, or small carts and barrows, and the big doors were solid enough to turn away the nearly mindless, usually docile worms. But now, as Willow darted through the small gate into the wide tunnel of Third Road, she knew the big gate would not stop the thing raving after her.

The road-tunnel swung to the right, climbing toward higher levels. Willow's small, booted feet pounded the stone as she ran. Behind her she heard a rending crash and an angry roar. Another crash, then she heard the gate's great timbers splintering as the fog-beast smashed through it. Cold, dense mists flooded into the tunnel, ebbing around her feet as she darted around another turn and saw brighter light ahead in the distance.

Up a steep slope she dashed, and out into a cross-tunnel. Some distance to her left, an old dwarf with white whiskers turned to stare at her and at the rolling mists entering the corridor behind her.

"Run!" she shouted, waving at the old one. "Run for your life!"

Down the tunnel, to the south, the elder gaped at her, then turned and hobbled away on ancient, stubby legs. After a few steps he stumbled and fell, and Willow turned and ran the other way. Runes on the stone wall near the intersection of tunnels told her that she

was now in the Second Road, heading north. In the distance, going the other way, the old dwarf had picked himself up and was hurrying off, but then cold fog surged outward from the intersecting tunnel and blocked her view. Kneeling, panting, Willow pried a flagstone from the floor of the tunnel and flung it into the blinding mist. “Here!” she shouted. “Here I am, you ... you contemptible *rust*! I’m the one you’re after!”

Fog rolled toward her, and she turned and ran again. Behind her came the beast of ages, raging and cold.

Along the tunnel, Willow gained a little distance by darting into a parallel vent-shaft barely large enough to admit her. Crouching, she ran along the shaft for a hundred yards, then scurried through another vent and was in the roadway again. Behind her, tearing at the wall where she had gone, the creature roared and lashed, then raised its head and saw her again. With renewed ferocity, it pursued.

The Second Road tunnel came out into a large, hewn cavern with a single sun-tunnel above. Tools and blocks of cut stone scattered around indicated that the dwarves of Thorbardin intended to build something here, but had not yet started construction. Willow darted across the wide opening and into the road-tunnel beyond, now going almost straight north. Not far ahead she saw people—dwarves, most of them unarmed, milling about in another wide concourse.

“Run!” Willow shouted at them. “Get away! The fog-beast is here! Run!”

Dwarves scurried around ahead of her, and, by threes and fives, disappeared. Scampering into the opening just ahead of the pursuing fogs, Willow blinked and glanced around. There wasn’t a sign of anyone, anywhere. Then suddenly, only a step ahead, a great open pit yawned before her, its wide opening partially screened over by a lattice of rods and bars. It was too late for her to stop. Leaping frantically, she reached the nearest crossbeam and scampered along it to another, her arms spread wide for balance. She teetered over a bottomless void, leapt to another crossbeam,

and still another, then was past the pit and racing into the next roadway opening.

Behind her, the fogs reached the great pit, and the creature within the mist spread wide, stubby wings and soared across, huge talons barely missing the latticework of crossbeams over its top. And, just below, clinging to perches and drop-lines, dozens of “Shame of Reorx” crafters stared at the huge, misty shape going past above them.

Hardly slowing her pace, Willow Summercloud dashed out into the great, vaulted emptiness of Anvil’s Echo and ran along the precarious, suspended catwalk through its center. Here and there, in the walls of the great chamber, a murder hole opened, and Willow shouted, “Alarm! Signal the gatehouse! Danger!”

She danced off the outer end of the catwalk on to solid stone and looked around. Fog was filling Anvil’s Echo as the creature came through, gliding just above the catwalk on set, web-taloned wings. Here and there, missiles flew from murder holes, but they simply entered the thick fog and bounced off what was within it. Willow turned and fled toward the dead end of the road, the gatehouse of Northgate.

* * * * *

Rage focused all her attention now on the puny little warm-blood fleeing ahead of her. She knew there were others here, but the rage within her—the rage that was all of her—was concentrated now on that one individual creature. It had challenged her and escaped. It had attacked her and escaped her fury. It had actually caused her pain, piercing the skin of her only soft part—her neck—with its edged implement.

She would get around to all the rest of the creatures in this place in her own time. They would all die. There was nothing they could do. She would hunt them down relentlessly and kill them all. But first, this one must die. This one had challenged her, and it must die as horribly as she could manage.

Through various tunnels, some wide and spacious, some barely large enough to let her spread her wings, she pursued the little

creature. Often, with the mists swirling around her, she could not see her prey, but she could sense where it was. Its very warmth was a beacon to her, almost a second sight, and she longed to feel that warmth burst and flow from her fangs, to hear the screams as the warmth struggled, then turned cold.

Now the tunnel became narrower, and ahead were echoes that said the way was blocked beyond. Other warm things were there, scurrying around, and she sensed their fear. But they could wait. She wanted this one—the one fleeing her—first.

* * * * *

Willow was panting and shaking as she entered the gatehouse tunnel, with its water lofts and mechanisms, and the great, glistening screw running along its length. Desperately she looked around and saw others, cringing here and there in the shadows.

“Open the gate!” she shouted.

The gate crew cringed and stared at her, then gaped at the thick mist rolling into the corridor just behind her.

“Quickly!” Willow demanded. “If you want to live, open the gate!”

“By whose orders?” a dwarf queried, glancing nervously at the thickening mist.

Willow started to say something and was drowned out by the roar of the creature as its head emerged into the narrow corridor, rising to glare over the great screw. Its roar was like echoing thunder in the enclosed space.

“By those orders!” Willow snapped. “Stop staring and open the tarnishing gate!”

Dwarves scurried toward a long, vertical lever set in sockets at the center of a great, up-and-down column of gray iron. With only a moment’s pause, one of them pulled the lever until it was horizontal. Opposite it on the column of iron, a second lever raised from horizontal to vertical, and the unmistakable roar of flowing water echoed in the gatehouse.

Grudgingly, the huge metal screw began to turn, and the massive plug at the end of it inched back on its tracks. A rim of outside

daylight appeared around its edges.

The fogs rolled, and a huge fanged head lunged forward, missing Willow by inches as she scooted under the screw and ran along its far side. The creature towered above the screw, seeking her, its prehensile neck curving upward and down, and she ducked beneath the screw again and reversed her direction. As the great head followed her, it seemed as though the creature were winding itself around the turning screw.

Dodging the crunching fangs, Willow leapt upward and grabbed the handle of her axe, still flopping beside the long neck. With a heave, she pulled it loose and struck again, making a second shallow cut.

The creature roared in fury, drummed great wings, and lashed its tail, filling the gatehouse with thunder. Beyond it, dwarven gatekeepers disappeared into little tunnels. The screw continued to turn, and the opening around the great plug widened. Abandoning her axe, which was stuck again, Willow dodged past the forward braces of the screw and dived for the opening. For a second, she stuck there, caught between plug and frame. Then the opening was enough, and she squeezed through just as a formidable, fanged muzzle lodged itself in the widening crack just behind her.

Willow crouched, picked up a fist-sized stone, and flung it at the nearest silver eye, shouting insults. The crack widened and more of the slavering, icy head emerged, straining after her. Just as the carapace above the eyes cleared the opening, the dwarf girl turned and ran.

It was sixty feet from one side of the gate to the other, and Willow covered the distance on flying feet. She reached the far side, ducked through the opening there, and ran back along the screw's length. All of the gatekeepers had disappeared, but she had seen how the gate worked. Reaching the iron column with its double levers, she dodged a flailing tail, threw her weight onto the vertical lever, and hauled it down. Valves shifted, waters flowed, and the screw reversed its rotation. The great plug began to close again.

Instantly, fogs rolled backward as the fog-creature realized the trap and began to withdraw. "Hurry, you be-rusted contraption!"

Willow shouted at the screw. "Can't you turn any faster?" With all her might, she hauled the lever down to full horizontal position. The sound of waters increased, the screw turned faster, and the creature hissed and roared in frenzied fury.

It threw itself this way and that, battering gatehouse walls, sockets, and turning screw. Great talons scrabbled against stone, digging deep gouges in the floor of the tunnel. Stubby, webbed wings beat the air, stirring the increasing cold mists into little storms. Willow Summercloud crawled behind the iron water column and huddled there, wide-eyed and pale.

The dwarves of Thorbardin had built their gates to be impenetrable. And with this as the goal, dwarven craft had done its best. The great beast's struggles neither stopped nor slowed the irrevocable turning of the huge screw in its sockets. Inch by inch, second by second, the massive gate-plug closed into its frame, closing on the neck of the trapped beast.

Rage raved. Rage roared, reared, and thundered, flailing mighty appendages. But the gate closed tighter and tighter as geared waterwheels took the flow from high tanks and transferred their energy to the screw.

To Willow, it seemed an hour before the great, steel-sheathed stone plug pushed itself as far as it could go into its sockets and came to a stop. Hardly an inch of daylight showed around it, and in that inch was pinched the long neck of the fog-beast. Its wings still beat, its talons still scrabbled, and its tail still lashed from side to side, but now the motions slowed and became erratic. It was almost impossible to see in the gatehouse because of the dense fog, but as the beast's flailing became feeble, it seemed to Willow that the fog became less dense.

There were shouts from somewhere, and the sounds of running feet, then armed dwarves swarmed into the narrow corridor, gaping at the sight ahead of them. The one leading was Damon Omenborn, his face a fierce scowl, his eyes dark with worry. Right behind him was Tag Salan.

Willow crawled out from behind the flow column, and Damon saw her. Leaping over the creature's twitching tail, the big Hylar

dodged under the screw and pulled the girl to her feet. He stared at her for a moment, then dropped his hammer and shield, caught her up in strong arms, and lifted her entirely off the floor, pressing her against him.

“Damon!” she managed, almost breathless. “Damon, quit that! Put me down!”

Reluctantly, he set her back on her feet. “You’re alive,” he said, almost in a whisper.

“I told you I’d get that thing,” she reminded him. “I got it.”

“You certainly did.” He glanced again toward the almost closed gate, throttling the beast’s neck. “Do you suppose it’s dead?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t know what it takes to kill a ... one of those.”

“Well, it sure isn’t going anywhere.” Tag Salan chuckled, ducking under the screw to get a better look at the fog-creature, which was still twitching. “I guess it can just stay where it is until we’re sure it’s finished. Do you think this is a dragon of some kind?”

“I don’t think so,” Damon said. “But it may be the kind of thing that dragons came from.” He turned back to Willow, still holding her arms with both hands. “What am I going to do with you?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She gazed up at him. “What do you have in mind?”

“Well,” he said, “there is an old legend here in Thorbardin. It’s about me. I don’t know what to make of it, but ... well, I wonder if you would be interested, possibly, in being the mother of kings?”



Epilogue

The Proper Thing To Do

Thousand of dwarves jammed the ramparts of Southgate as Cale Greeneye and the Council of Thanes met there to supervise the removal of fallen weapons from the battlefields below. The Einar, who had waited out the siege within Thorbardin, were going home now, back to their herds and their fields. But few of those leaving would ever again think of themselves as Einar. During their stay in Thorbardin, most had decided between the hammer and the axe.

Some were remaining behind, to join the thanes within the underground nation. But most were returning to the outside, and most of those, having chosen the sun over the stone, would henceforth be Neidar.

“We have learned a great lesson here,” old Olim Goldbuckle stated to those around him. “Willen was right. Thorbardin is invulnerable to siege, but without the Neidar outside, to complement the Holgar within, it cannot stand as the fortress of Kal-Thax.”

“We are becoming, more and more, two separate peoples,” Slide Tolec agreed. “The Holgar thanes have fought outside Thorbardin and yearned to withdraw within. The Neidar have dwelt within Thorbardin, and have yearned for the open skies. I wonder if we can ever truly be one again.”

“Or if we ever were,” Vog Ironface rumbled. “It may be that an age is coming to its end.”

“Ages begin and end only in the fettered minds of scrollsters,” Olim pronounced, then turned a wry grin toward Quill Runebrand. “No offense intended, Keeper of Lore. Without your peculiar

reasonings, how would the rest of us ever know when yesterday ends and tomorrow begins?”

Willen shook his head, uncomfortable as always with the bantering of his peers. The old leaders seemed to become more philosophical with every passing year. Especially the jovial, flint-hearted old Daewar, Olim Goldbuckle, and the intuitive Theiwar, Slide Tolec. And yet, to Willen it often seemed that the less sense his chieftain-peers made, the more wisdom might be found in what they said. To his soldier’s mentality, it was a riddle beyond solution.

“Will you be coming back soon?” he asked Cale Greeneye.

“To visit, of course.” The Neidar nodded. “But maybe never again to live. Olim is right about the lesson we have learned. A fortress that nobody can get out of is as pointless as one that nobody can get into. The gates of Thorbardin must be able to open, as well as to close, and for that, there must be Neidar outside to protect the fortress, just as the fortress protects the lands around it.”

“We will only become more separate as the ages pass,” Willen said, then glanced around sheepishly. He realized that he was beginning to sound just as vague and wise as the other chieftains.

“Different, yes,” Cale Greeneye said. “We were always different, the people of the stone and the people of the sun. But not necessarily separate. We out here need the security of your presence, just as you need ours. Besides, differences can strengthen bonds if they are good bonds to start with. We’ve seen an example of that, too.”

“We have?”

“Your son ... my nephew, and his Einar girl. Those two have only one thing in common, but it is their differences that will make their bond succeed.”

“I suppose so.” Willen shrugged. “You’re probably right, because Tera said the very same thing to me just yesterday. She isn’t often wrong in such matters. By the way, good luck with your kender.”

“What kender?”

“That little nuisance that has been roaming Thorbardin lately. You didn’t know? Well, she showed up at Hybardin and proclaimed

that she has finished her tour of Thorbardin and intends to go see the outlands now. With you.”

“Like blazes she will!”

“As I said,” Willen said, “good luck with your kender.”

* * * * *

Quist Redfeather was playing bones with his jailers when Willen Ironmaul came for him. For a long time—for weeks, it seemed, though in this underground place the Cobar had lost track of time—he had been held captive in what he had learned was the ward chamber behind the Southgate keep. It had not been cruel captivity. They had fed him well, had given him ale now and then, and had not tormented him. But it was still captivity, without question. The grim armed dwarves who guarded his quarters left no doubt that he was not going anywhere unless and until someone in authority ordered it.

The Cobar had made two vows to himself. The first was that if he ever got out he would never again get mixed up in dwarf business. The second was that, after this, he would never again play games with dwarves. The game of bones had always been a favorite pastime for Quist, and he took pride in being good at it. But, somehow, he was now down to his last arrowhead. He had already lost all of his weapons. Although he had been relieved of them upon entry, now they no longer belonged to him, but to various dwarven jailers. He had lost his boots, his cloak, his favorite feathered headgear, and he had lost his copper bracelet. A jovial, gold-bearded guard named Plaid Silvernail was wearing it now.

For all of his watchfulness, he had found no evidence that any of the dwarves cheated at bones. Still, they usually won. So, by the time a band of dwarves showed up from the interior with orders for his release into their custody, Quist Redfeather was ready for a change.

The new guards were thoroughly armored and efficient. All had the same dark, back-swept beards that he had noticed on Damon Omenborn. He suspected they were of the tribe called Hylar.

Briskly, they escorted him along a corridor where a huge auger-banded metal screw sat in great sockets, and past the massive gate-plug that had awed him the first time he saw it, and still did. Beyond, on the walled ledge outside Thorbardin, others waited. The one who stepped forward, peering up at him with hard, wise eyes, bore a striking resemblance to Damon Omenborn, though this dwarf was older and had a stance that suggested high position.

"I am Willen Ironmaul," the dwarf said in a voice that was like smooth, deep riversong. "My son told me how you helped him, and how you behaved with honor when you might have done otherwise." Without waiting for an answer, the dwarf turned and started down the rampart. "Come with me, human," he said.

Quist followed along. He would have followed, even if he hadn't wanted to, because of the ten efficient-looking armed dwarves who ringed him and herded him forward. At the bottom of the rampart, Willen Ironmaul clapped his hands, and other dwarves came from beyond new, fresh-hewn battlements. They led twelve horses, eleven of them wearing the saddles and gear of dwarven mounts, the twelfth magnificently attired in human-proportioned trappings.

As Quist gaped at the horse, pursing his lips in appreciation of its fine lines and handsome appearance, Willen Ironmaul said, "This animal is Damon Omenborn's best horse. Its name is Shamath. It is yours now, by my son's wish."

The man stepped toward the animal, hardly believing his ears, then paused. He glanced aside at the Hylar chieftain. "It's a real horse, isn't it? I mean, it isn't a wizard or something? It won't sprout wings?"

For a second, the grim lines of the dwarf's visage softened. He almost smiled, then straightened his face. "Shamath is a horse," he assured the human. "He has never been anything but a horse." He clapped his hands again, and one of the ten escorts produced a bundle, which he handed to Quist. Within it were an exquisite light shield of dwarven craft; a strong, recurved bow of fine lemonwood; a beautiful dagger; a thick, bound sheaf of arrows with dwarven steel points; and various straps and wraps for the implements. Another of the escort stepped forward with a parcel which

contained Quist's own lost boots, cloak, copper bracelet, and feather headgear.

"I had to buy those things back from your, ah, hosts of the gate," Willen Ironmaul said severely. "They cost me a nice price, too. Even a human should know better than to play bones with a Daewar."

Without further explanation, the dwarves mounted their horses, clambering up the short boarding ladders slung from their saddles, and at a gesture from the Hylar chieftain, Quist swung aboard Shamath. He knew the instant his legs cradled the animal's big barrel that he had never ridden a finer horse.

Still surrounded by armed dwarves, the man was led away, riding out from the dwarven fortress toward the Promontory, angling eastward toward the border roads.

It was a three-day trip from Southgate to the secluded cove above the Road of Passage, where the dwarves took their guest, and not once in those three days did any of them, Willen Ironmaul or the Ten, give him a word of explanation as to where they were going, or why. Dwarves, Quist Redfeather decided for the hundredth time, could be the most exasperating people in the world.

Still, he had no choice, and, except for being kept in the dark, he was treated courteously.

Then, on the third evening, they topped out on a low crest directly above the cove where the Road of Passage crossed from dwarven to human lands. Below them were tents, fires, and people—human people, doing human things.

Willen Ironmaul rode up beside the man then and pointed. "That tent there, the one with the awning. Tell me who you see there."

Quist squinted in the dusk, then his eyes widened in disbelief. "Seena," he said hoarsely. "My wife! And those are my children! But they were captives! The overlords ..."

"There has been a change in the city of Xak Tsaroth," Willen Ironmaul told him. "The overlords have been overthrown, and others are in power there now. We may be able to work out some trade agreements with the new proprietors, our trade warden tells us. He says Darr Bolden and his followers seem like reasonable people ... for humans."

Quist stared down at the evening fires, his eyes round as he gazed at the familiar figures and dear faces of his family. He raised his reins, then hesitated, turning. "Your son, Damon ... He arranged this for me?"

"It seemed the proper thing to do," Willen Ironmaul said gruffly.

"Where is he? Where is Damon?"

"My son," the Hylar said, "was married a few days ago to a very stubborn little Einar girl with auburn hair and iron opinions. Following the wedding, they took up new quarters in Hybardin and ... well, they haven't been seen since."

Quist nodded. "Then let me thank you," he said, extending his hand.

With a growl, the Hylar chief reined his mount and turned away. "I'll never understand humans," he rumbled, glancing back. "If that were my family down there, I wouldn't be wasting time up here chatting." The Hylar snapped his reins and headed back the way he had come, his ten escorts falling in behind him.

"Dwarves," Quist Redfeather muttered, shaking his head. "Of all the ... all the ..." At a loss for words, even to himself, he drummed Shamath with his heels and headed for the cove where his family awaited him.

Behind him, high on a mountain shoulder, Willen Ironmaul glanced back, then turned to the First of the Ten. "When we return, Cable," he said, "go and find the trade warden. Tell him those fields of grain he has been coveting—in the Cobar lands north of Ergoth—may yield profitable trade for us now that we have a grateful Cobar to speak for us there."

He flicked his reins, heading for home, and muttering to himself. "The gratitude of a former enemy should be worth a dozen tokens in striking a trade agreement." Then the chief of the Hylar shook his head, sighing. More and more, he thought, he was beginning to think like Olim Goldbuckle.

* * * * *

In a furniture shop in Theibardin, a burly shopkeeper discovered that a trade had been made. A good pair of calipers was missing

from his shop, and in the tool's place had been left a polished oval gemstone that tasted terrible and had a disconcerting habit of changing colors. With an oath, the shopkeeper flung the thing out of his shop. "I knew it," he rumbled. "I knew that kender got away with something."

In the concourse off Fifth Road, a passing Klar farmer noticed the stone, picked it up, and dropped it into his belt-pouch. Later, in the worm warren, he studied it, holding it this way and that in the light, watching it turn from red to white to black, with myriad shades between.

Had he been Daewar, he might have kept it as an oddity for display. But as a Klar, he found no use for it. After looking it over, he cast it aside.

For a time, the gem lay half buried in a pile of crushed stone and slops, then was carted, rubble, slops, and all to the worm troughs, where the tractor worms were fed.

The Stone of Threes of Kal-Thax, which was to have been the foundation of the Seventh Tower of High Sorcery, was never seen again. It was noted, though, that one particular lot of worm-web consigned to the weavers of spunstone had a tendency to change color at odd intervals.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Resident Texan Dan Parkinson has a mystique as a top-notch and top-selling Western writer, and is a prolific author of fantasy, science-fiction, and high-seas adventures as well. Firmly established as a TSR name, he has written his own science-fiction love story for the company, the acclaimed *Starsong*, as well as several novels and short stories in the realm of the DRAGONLANCE® saga. Dan also authored the first book in the Dwarven Nations Trilogy, the best-selling *The Covenant of the Forge*.

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